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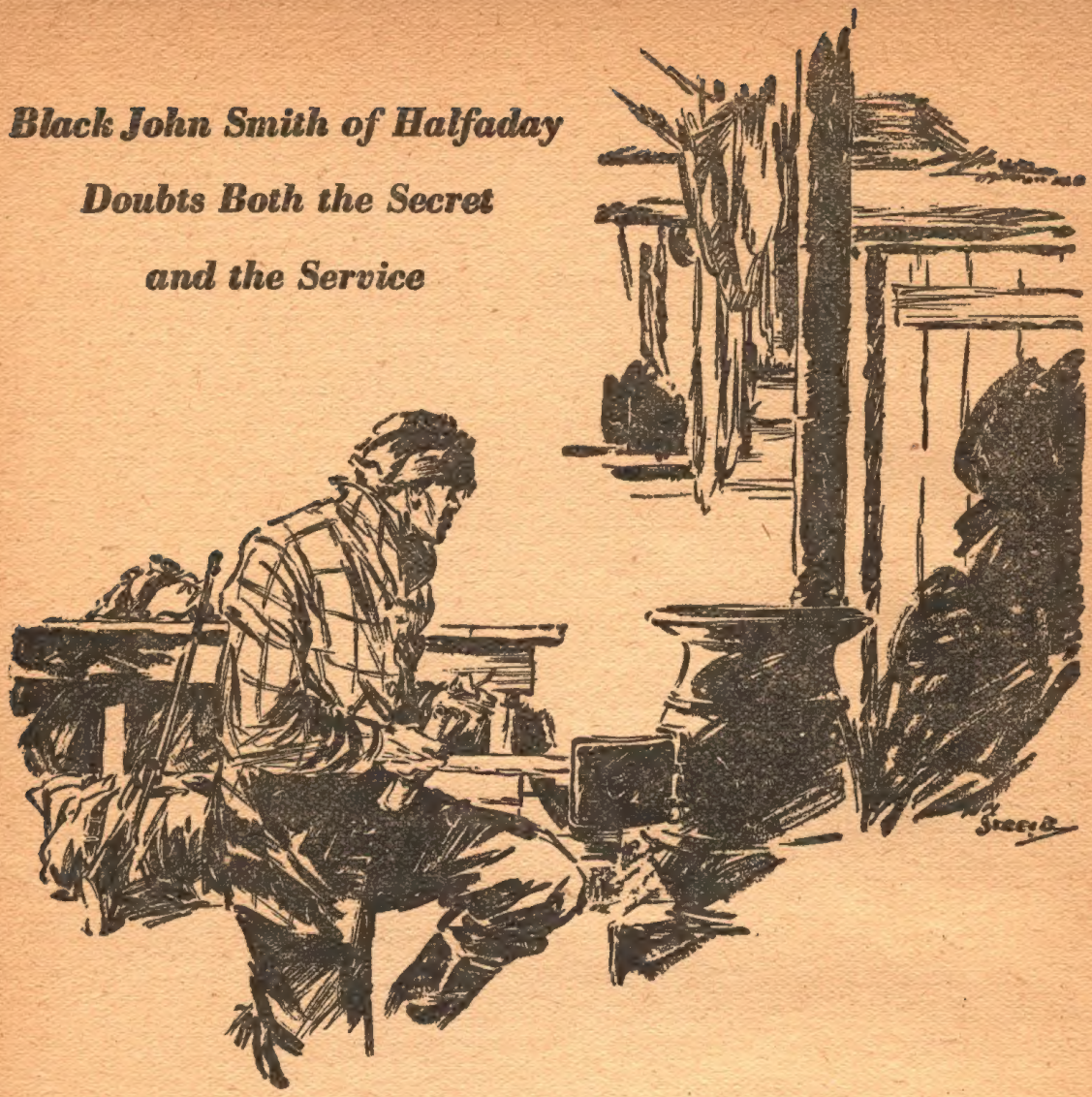
Black John Smith of Halfaday Doubts Both the Secret and the Service



SECRET SERVICE

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Black John Acts as Guide," "Corporal Downey Cracks a Case," etc.

OLD CUSH folded the newspaper he had been reading, placed it on the back bar, and reached for the leather dice box, as Black John Smith entered the doorway and crossed to the bar.

"Three treys," he announced, as he examined the dice he rolled from the box. "Guess them's good enough to leave in one."

Black John gathered the dice and cast them. "Three sixes," he announced, with a grin. "Don't never send a boy to do a man's job. That's a horse on you, an' here's the second horse. Jest git you an eyeful of them fives—five of 'em in one throw."

Cush glanced at the five fives that Black John had scattered upon the bar, returned the dice to the box, and set out bottle and glasses. "A man would be a fool to shake agin luck like that," he said. "He'd prob'ly waste a middlin' good throw doin' it."

"Ain't you got that paper read yet?" asked Black John. "Here it's been better'n a week sence Red John fetched it up from

Dawson, an' you been nickin' away at it ever sence."

"It's mostly about this here war that's in it, an' a man likes to keep posted. Accordin' to a piece I was readin' when you come in, it all started on account of them Spanish blow'd up one of our battleships down there in Cuby. There's a pitcher of the ship in there. The *Maine,* was the name of it. Good lookin' boat, all right. But at that, it don't look like nothin' to start a war over."

"Well, hell, you can't have a country runnin' around blowin' up another country's battleships. Boats like that runs into money."

"Wars runs into money, too," opined Cush. "An' a damn sight more money than one ship. Looks like, if the United States had sent 'em a bill fer it, they'd paid it without no war. They know'd damn well we could lick 'em."

"Yeah, but there was a lot of American sailors got blow'd up, too. You don't want to fergit that."

"Right around two hundred an' sixty of 'em, accordin' to the paper," said Cush. "But them Spanish must of know'd they'd lose more'n two hundred an' sixty soldiers in a war with Uncle Sam. What I claim, a soldier is about like a sailor, an' they'd saved theirself a hell of a lot of trouble an' money, too, if they'd of sent over two hundred an' sixty soldiers an' let us blow them up. Er else they could of replaced them sailors, an' mebbe, throw'd in a few extry fer good measure."

"Is this Cushing's Fort?" demanded a man who stood in the doorway, a pack sack dangling by one strap from his shoulder.

"Yeah," replied Cush, reaching to the back bar for another glass, "this is the place. Step up. The house is buyin' a a drink."

THE man advanced to the bar and swung the pack to the floor between his legs. "I had a hell of a time gettin' here," he announced, filling his glass to the brim. "It's damn near three weeks sence I left the Yukon an' headed up the White River. I shoved up three wrong cricks before I come to this Halfaday. The name's Smith—John Smith."

"It might have been," said Black John, "in the early days of Halfaday, but it ain't no more. Jest reach in the name-can there at the end of the bar an' pull you out a name."

"What do you mean?" growled the other, his eyes narrowing as he regarded the big man who stood with his elbow on the bar.

"Meanin', that the name of John Smith is plumb extinct on Halfaday as fer as newcomers is concerned. There's a steadily diminishin' number of us that's got the name preëmpted, as you might say. I'm one of 'em—commonly know'd as Black John, on account that my whiskers is that color."

"Oh, you're the fella I heard about down on the Yukon, eh?"

"I couldn't say where I've been heard about."

"Well, you run the crick here, don't you? Held up an army er somethin' onct, didn't you?"

"Only part of one. An' as fer runnin' the crick, me an' Cush, here, tries in our feeble way to keep Halfaday moral. We don't like fer no crime to pop up on the crick."

"What d'you mean—crime?"

"Well—takin' the word in its broadest sense—like murder, all forms of larceny, claim-jumpin', an' general skullduggery."

"What's skullduggery?"

"Skullduggery is whatever hangable offense ain't included in them crimes I mentioned. Small crimes like spittin' on the floor, gittin' drunk, er blowin' in yer saucer, is overlooked. Bein' as quite a few of us up here is outlawed fer one reason er another, we don't want no police snoopin' around the crick. You see, it's either heaven or hell, er Halfaday with us—an' most of us prefers Halfaday."

"They say yer right clost up agin the line where it's handy to duck back an' forth

between Canady an' Alasky in case the police does show up."

"Yeah, I don't know no other health resort that's more beneficially located, as a Chamber of Commerce would say. We're jest about a mile from the line—with Alasky layin' up a dry gulch with an easy grade."

"If you claim a man ain't allowed to use his own name here, what name kin he use?" asked the man sullenly.

"We ain't got no kick about a man's usin' his own name," replied Black John. "It's only the name, John Smith, that's tabooed on Halfaday. The inventive genius displayed by folks in pickin' 'em out an alias makes me wonder, sometimes, why they wasn't nabbed on the scene of their crime! As an aid to about ninety percent of our newcomers, me an' Cush invented the name-can settin' there on the end of the bar. It consists of a lot of names we copied out of a hist'ry book that One Eyed John Smith left behind when we hung him, one time, an' we mixed up the names an' wrote 'em on slips an' put 'em in the name-can. Each prospective John Smith, when he arrives amongst us, is invited to draw hisself a name, which thereupon becomes hisn till he gits hung er is otherwise accounted fer."

"Huh," grunted the other. "An' who the hell does all this hangin' yer talkin' about?"

"The boys. What a man done before he got to Halfaday ain't none of our business—but what he does after he gits here is subject to inquiry by a miners' meetin'. You kin mebbe notice how slick an' shiny that rafter is right above where yer standin'. Rope done that. In bad weather the boys favors inside hangin's. Mostly, though, we use trees."

REACHING into the can, the man withdrew a slip of paper. "Patrick Webster," he read.

"There," said Black John, "you've got a name that every Tom, Dick an' Harry won't be thinkin' up an' claimin'. Jest shove the slip in yer pocket so there won't no one else be drawin' it whilst yer amongst us. At the end of yer sojourn we'll find it, an' stick it back in the can. Now that yer all set, drink up, an' have one on me."

They drank, and the stranger ordered another, tendering in payment a twenty-dollar bill. "What does a man do in a damn country like this, now he's got here?" he asked. "I don't know nothin' about gold diggin'. I jest got in on this rush to see what one was like."

"Well," grinned Black John, "they claim travel broadens a man—an' I know damn well it's apt to stretch one. While idleness, *per se,* ain't no crime on Halfaday, good honest toil on a windlass er the end of a shovel has a tendency to kind of keep his morals from runnin' hog wild on him. Gold diggin' ain't hard to learn."

"I've got plenty of money," retorted the man. "There can't no one make me work if I don't feel like it. Where does a man live up here?"

"The boys all lives on their claims. There's quite a few empty shacks along the crick that's been abandoned fer one reason er another. They're all on claims that pays better'n wages. No claim on Halfaday's been worked out. You might move into one of them. In the meanwhile, till you git a chanct to look 'em over, you kin throw yer stuff in my cabin. I've got an extry bunk in there. It's jest a short piece up the crick from here."

"I don't move in with no one," replied the man. "I want a place of my own. Much obliged to you, jest the same. Where is these empty cabins—up the crick er down?"

"Both," answered Black John. "The handiest one from here is down the crick only about a quarter of a mile. It belonged to One Eyed John, that fella I was tellin' you we hung."

"What did you hang him fer?"

"H-u-u-m, let's see—damn if I remember. Hey, Cush, what the hell was it we hung One Eyed John fer, anyhow?"

"I couldn't say," answered the somber-

faced Cush. "Drink up. I'm buyin' one."

"It was ondoubtless some irregularity of some kind," said Black John. "It was away back last summer, sometime. A man can't keep all them hangin's separate."

"Yer a tough bunch up here, ain't you?" commented the man with just the hint of a sneer in his voice.

"Tough!" exclaimed Black John. "It's plain to see that someone's been lyin' to you! Fact is, we're the easy-goin'est an' moralest crick in the Yukon! I ain't sayin' but what there's them amongst us whose past might be somethin' to chaw on. But, up here, we're jest one big happy fambly.

An' that reminds me, we kind of like to know which police a man's got his eye out fer—jest so we can notify him if one should show up on the crick. Now in your case I'd say offhand, that the—er, motivatin' influence that roused up yer yen fer travel occurred somewheres down in the States. Am I right; er wrong?"

FOR an instant the man hesitated, his glance traveling swiftly from face to face. "They're layin' a bank robbery onto me that happened somewheres down in Oklahoma," he said. "But I didn't have nothin' to do with it—see?"

"Oh, shore," agreed Black John. "Me an' Cush kin see at a glance that yer jest a retired capitalist out to see the world. Fact is, anyone would know that if a fella was so damn dumb he couldn't think up no better alias than John Smith, he couldn't pull off no successful bank robbery."

"Is that so!"

"What's that?" asked Black John, as he returned the bottle to the bar after filling his glass.

"I said—about that cabin, you was tellin' me about, is it up the crick, er down?"

"Down. This side of the crick. A quarter of a mile. Better drink up an' have another."

"Not right now. I'm goin' down an' look that cabin over. Be back after a while an' git me an outfit of grub."

When the man had departed with his packsack, Old Cush glanced across the bar at Black John. "You was kind of bearin' down on him, John—about them hangin's, wasn't you? He'll think we don't do nothin' up here but hang folks."

"It'll be a healthy thought," retorted Black John. "Fact is, Cush—I don't like Pat's looks. I never seen one of them shifty-eyed liars yet that was worth a damn. Didn't have nothin' to do with it, he says. Hell!"

II

SOME three or four days after the man, Webster, had moved into One Eyed John's cabin, Black John beached his canoe on a gravel bar several miles down the creek and examined some fresh moose tracks. Picking up his rifle, he was about to take the trail when a loud hail drew his gaze to a canoe that was just rounding a sharp bend, some hundred yards below. Seating himself on a rock, he filled his pipe and awaited for the canoe with its single occupant to beach beside his own. Without seeming to, Black John's gaze took in every detail of the man who stepped from the canoe and greeted him with a grin.

"Could it be," he asked, "that I'm standing face to face with Black John Smith, himself?"

"It could," replied Black John, as he removed the pipe from his mouth and spat onto the gravel.

"Just the man I was looking for! Can I have a few words with you in private?"

"I don't know how else you could have

'em, onlest we was to go on up to Cush's," Black John answered with a glance that swept the little valley of Halfaday from rim to rim.

The man's grin broadened. "They say you run things up here?"

"Well, it na'chly devolves on someone to keep a crick moral."

"I was wondering if you couldn't help me."

"We help some. Others we hinder—even to the extent of a hangin'. The law, we don't neither help nor hinder."

The grin became an audible chuckle. "Oh come now—that's pretty hard on me. There might be exceptions, mightn't there?"

"I wouldn't know of any."

"The fact is, I am the law. I'm Christopher Blue—U. S. Secret Service. We Secret Service men rarely disclose our identity—unless we know who we're dealing with." He paused and turned back his shirt on the inner side of which was pinned a silvered shield upon which appeared U. S. SECRET SERVICE and beneath the lettering the number, 407. "You see," he continued, "I'm laying all my cards on the table."

"Yeah? An' what am I s'posed to do with 'em?"

"It's like this—a couple of months ago a gang of five men rode into a town in east Oklahoma, and stuck up a bank to the tune of sixty thousand dollars. Three of 'em were just common hill billies—moonshiners and small time crooks—but the other two were old hands at the game. One of 'em was Curly Jack, a notorious Southwest desperado, and the other was Bill Crawford, an escape from Walla Walla, where he was doing life for another stick-up in which a man was killed.

"They rode into town and left the three hill billies outside to hold the horses and stand off any trouble that might start there, and Crawford and Curly went in.

"It was easy, and they crowded the packages of bills into a sack, and started for the door, with Crawford carrying the sack, when someone touched off an alarm bell, and by the time they hit the sidewalk, the citizens had opened up on 'em from windows and store doors.

"The hill billies returned the fire, and Crawford's horse went down with a bullet through his head. Just as Curly was reaching for his own saddle horn, Crawford stuck the muzzle of his gun against his back and pulled the trigger. Then he jumped into Curly's saddle, and took out after the other three who were disappearing down the street in a cloud of dust, leaving Curly there on the sidewalk with a hole in his lung you could stick your fist in. Knowing he'd been double-crossed, Curly gasped out the name of Bill Crawford before he cashed in, and the Government put me on the case.

"Posses turned out, and after about a week in the hills they rounded up the three hill billies. But they didn't get Crawford, who had double-crossed the boobs by not showing up at the hide-out where they'd agreed to meet if they got separated. Crawford's horse was found a few days after the robbery shot through the head in a bunch of timber near the railroad, so they figured he'd killed him and got away on the train.

"I didn't waste any time in the hill country. I knew that was the last place a guy like Crawford would hit for. I ran onto his trail in St. Louis, and followed it on out to 'Frisco, and from there to Seattle, then to Skagway, and on to White Horse, where I learned that a bird answering his description had inquired around a bit, and headed for Halfaday Crick. That would be nearly four weeks ago."

THE man paused, and Black John refilled his pipe. "Yeah," he said, "an' so what?"

"Well, what I'd like to know, has Crawford showed up on Halfaday? He's five foot-ten, and would weigh right around a hundred and seventy. Brown eyes, with a slight cast in one of 'em."

"An' if he did?"

"Why—a damn cuss that would kill one partner to make a getaway and double-cross all the rest of 'em, wouldn't be entitled to much consideration from anybody, would he?"

Black John puffed at his pipe. Halfaday is Canadian territory," he said at length. "Have you got papers fer fetchin' him out —in case you was to find him here on the crick?"

"No, I haven't. I'd have to go clear down to Dawson for 'em, and waste a lot of time. I figured that if I could locate him, I could ease him out of the country without going clear back around by the Yukon. Someone told me there was a trail that cut back from the White River country to the coast."

"Yeah—the Dalton Trail. There's only one police post on it, at the pass—an' you could dodge that easy enough."

"Could you tell me how to strike this trail, in case I'd want to use it?" asked the man eagerly.

"Oh, shore. It ain't no trick to hit the Dalton Trail. Saves a lot of time, too—from here. All you do is go back down the crick to the White, then up the White; it's about three days' paddlin' till you come to the falls. It ain't no reg'lar falls, but a long steep rapids. You can't miss it—it's the first one you come to that you have to carry around above the mouth of Halfaday. Then you leave yer canoe, an' hit out afoot. There's two canyons on the south side of the river, right at the falls. Both of 'em are deep an' steep sided. Be sure an' take the right hand one. The left hand one runs on fer what is three, four days' walk, an' then ends in a high wall where the crick jumps mebbe two hundred foot to the bottom. A man couldn't git out of it, after he onct got in there. An' he wouldn't be no place if he did. He'd shore git bushed in them mountains. If he took that box canyon, he'd jest have to foller back down it to the mouth, an' take the other one. This right-hand one is deep an' steep fer a couple of days, like the other, only instead of leadin' up agin a wall, it slants up to a divide, an' there you be—right on the Dalton Trail, which you can't miss from there to the coast."

"That's simple enough," replied the man. "Take the right hand canyon, you say?"

"Yeah—that's the one. But even s'posin' you find this here Crawford on Halfaday, you wouldn't be allowed to take him away with you. You ain't got no authority to arrest a man on Canadian territory, an' if you tried it, you'd likely be hung fer kidnapin', which is hangable under our skullduggery law."

"But hell, man—you can't hang a United States officer!"

BLACK JOHN shook his head. "I do'no," he said. "We've hung a hell of a lot of men. We could try damn hard."

"But—suppose I arrest him on United States territory? You're right close to the line up here, ain't you?"

"In such case, it wouldn't be none of our business," replied Black John. "Yeah —Halfaday's right up agin' the line. But if I was you, I'd slip back down to Dawson an' git them papers. If this here Crawford is on the crick, the chances is, he'll be smart enough not to go acrost the line."

"I guess I'll take a chance," said the man, after a few moments of silence. "I'll go up and look the ground over and see if I can spot my man. Then if I have to, I'll go back for the papers. Damn nuisance though. It'll take a couple of weeks, won't it?"

"Yeah, it'll take that long, even if you had good luck."

"Where could a man stay while he was here? Is there a boarding house of any kind on the crick?"

"No, there ain't no boardin' house on Halfaday. I've got a good cabin not far from the tradin' post an' saloon. Yer welcome to throw yer stuff in there. I've got an extry bunk."

"That's fine! I'll be glad to pay whatever you think is right."

"There'll be plenty of time to talk about the pay when we see what luck you have."

"Has anyone showed up on the crick within the past month that might answer Crawford's description, do you know?"

Black John shook his head as he knocked the dottle from the bowl of his pipe against the heel of his pac. "I wouldn't know about that," he said. "I told you a while back that, on Halfaday we don't neither hinder nor help the police."

The man grinned. "I know, but seeing that you offered to put me up, I thought maybe you'd relented in my case."

"Nope. On Halfaday there's two kinds of relentin' we don't never do. One's about helpin' the police—an' the other's about hangin' miscreants. What we better do is to go on up to my cabin, an' you lay low there till this evenin'. The boys generally collects in the saloon nights, an' then you kin slip in an' look 'em over. You kin change yer name if you kin think up one besides John Smith, an' mingle with the boys like yer some fella that's jest come onto the crick in, you might say, the nat'chel course of events. Does this here Webster know you by sight?"

"Webster?"

"Oh, er—yeah—ain't that what you said this fella's name was?"

"I said Crawford—Bill Crawford."

"Oh, shore—Crawford! The name sounds sim'lar, an' I'm a mite hard of hearin' in my left ear. Well, come on. We'll git agoin'. I had figgered on mebbe gittin' me a moose, but there ain't no hurry. I've got part of a quarter still hangin'. Git in yer canoe, an' foller me on up.'

III

ALONG toward the middle of the afternoon, Black John strolled into the barroom, where Old Cush, steel-rimmed glasses firmly astride his nose, was deep in the perusal of the newspaper spread out before him on the bar.

"Still readin' up about that damn war?" asked Black John, as Cush, without looking up from his paper, set out the bottle and glasses.

"No, I finished about that—an' it's jest like I claimed; it would of been a damn sight cheaper fer them Spanish to pay fer that boat they blow'd up, because it tells here how they lost all their own boats, besides them ones Admiral Dooley sunk over to them Phillipyne Islands."

"What with newspapers spread all over the bar, this here is gittin' to look more like a lib'ry than a saloon," opined Black John as he poured his drink. "An' besides which, it looks from here like incipient skullduggery is rife on Halfaday."

"What's 'incipient'? An' what's 'rife'?" growled Cush. "It's gittin' so you can't talk without you use words which it's doubtful if you know the meanin' of 'em yerself. Take it like if yer readin' in a Bible er a noospaper you kin skip them words you don't know when you come to 'em—but when anyone talks 'em to you, they got you cornered. An' besides, what's skullduggery got to do with a saloon lookin' like a lib'ry?"

"Nothin'," grinned Black John, "but if you really wanted to make it look like a lib'ry, you ort to git you a dictionary. It would be handy, too, fer a man of your limited vocabulary."

"What I claim, a dictionary ain't no good!" Cush retorted. "My daughter use' to have one damn near four inches thick. I'd heard 'em well spoke of, an' I tried to use it a time er two, but the way they've got 'em fixed—if you don't know how to spell a word, you can't look it up. An when anyone is talkin' to you they don' stand around an' spell out the words."

"That's so," admitted Black John, "but you could look up the words you come acrost when yer readin'—they're already spelled out for you."

"It's a damn sight quicker to skip 'em. If a man spent all his time clawin' through

a dictionary, he wouldn't never git no readin' done. What I claim, if a man wants a book, he'd better stick to the Bible. To hell with them dictionaries!

"But speakin' of readin', there's a piece here in this paper where five fellas come ridin' into some town down in Oklahoma, an' stuck up a bank fer sixty thousan', an' one of their horses got shot, an' two of 'em started fer the same horse, an' one of 'em shot the one that got to the horse

first, an' jumped on the horse hisself, an' rid away after the others, leavin' this one he shot layin' there. Before he died, he told 'em the one that shot him was named Bill Crawford, an' the paper says how this here Crawford was a lifer, that had broke out of some prison, an' they're huntin' him all over hell. I hope they ketch him, too! A damn skunk that would do a trick like that had ort to be hung."

YEAH," agreed Black John, "he shore had. An' that reminds me—there's a fella down to my shack which he claims he's a U. S. Secret Service man. He's huntin' a man named Bill Crawford fer a sixty thousan' dollar bank job down in Kansas."

"Cripes!" exclaimed Old Cush. "You don't s'pose a damn cuss like Crawford is right here on Halfaday, do you? Say—hold on! That there Pat Webster! He said somethin' about a Oklahoma bank job, didn't he? Claimed he wasn't in on it, er somethin'?"

"He ondoubtless lied," said Black John. "Like I told you, I never did like his looks."

"But you say this here Secret Service man is down to your shack? How come you'd favor the law—an' 'specially the American law? It ain't none of our business what Webster done in Oklahoma."

"I ain't exactly favorin' the law, as such," explained Black John. "I'm puttin' this party up jest as a common citizen. I told him plain that he wouldn't be allowed to take Webster off'n Halfaday, without he had papers from the Mounted Police. He said he'd look the ground over, an' if he couldn't nab Webster on the American side, he'd go down to Dawson an' git the papers."

"How come this fella got to your cabin without showin' up here?" asked Cush.

"I run onto him down the crick. I was moose huntin' an' he hollered at me. So I took him right on up to the cabin."

"But—what with your trouble bein' over on the American side, that-a-way, if I was you, John, I'd be damn careful how I fooled around with them American police. How do you know you don't talk in yer sleep, er somethin'?"

"I prob'ly couldn't tell him nothin' he don't know a'ready. He called me by name when he first seen me. Them Secret Service men is smart as hell. You see, Cush, I couldn't hardly do no different—what with my skirts not bein' clean on that Army payroll job."

"Skirts!" cried Cush, his eyes widening as he swept the steel rimmed spectacles from nose to forehead. "That's the first time you ever told me there was any wimmin mixed up in it! You mean he's located them wimmin, an' he made a deal to turn 'em loose er somethin' if you'd help him nail Webster?"

BLACK JOHN maintained a perfectly straight face. "Well, that ain't jest exactly the thought I meant to convey," he said. "But it's clost enough fer the present. The fact is, Cush, how would

you like to engage in a little secret service venture yerself? The pay should be attractive—an' you've jest showed that you've got onlimited imagination."

"No sir! Not by a damn sight! You know, John, that me an' you has made it a p'int never to have nothin' to do with helpin' or hinderin' the police. Onct in a great while we have stretched the p'int jest a mite, mebbe, in the case of Corporal Downey, where the circumstances seemed right. But that ain't no sign we should go helpin' police right an' left, every time one shows up on the crick. It wouldn't be right. The boys comes here, knowin' they'll git a square deal as long as they stay moral. That's the reputation Halfaday's got—an' that's the way we've kep' it. Hell, if we begun tippin' 'em off to the police, the boys that's on the run would quit comin' here—an' then where would I be, dependin' like I do on their trade to keep me goin'? Of course, in this here partic'lar case, I ain't blamin' you—havin' them wimmin to look out fer. You couldn't hardly do no different, an' him havin' the goods on you. But it had ort to be a damn good lesson to you to leave wimmin alone. I ort to know—I've had four of 'em—an' the only good one I ever had up an' died on me."

Black John nodded. "You know I ain't never favored no wimmin on Halfaday."

"Shore, I know," replied Cush, gloomily, "but now, when these ones git turned loose, they'll prob'ly be flockin' in on you. I kin see where Halfaday ain't never goin' to be the same no more. Onct a woman gits anythin' on a man, she'll ride him till there ain't nothin' he kin do but move on. I don't know what the hell I'll do around here without you."

Black John grinned. "I ain't hangin' up no rent sign on my cabin, yet. Fact is, I'll jest slip an order to all them wimmin to stay away from Halfaday—an' they'll stay! I guess you didn't onderstand how to handle them wimmin of yourn, Cush. You've got to be masterful."

"Yeah? Well you wait an' see!"

"So you don't want in on this here secret service venture, eh?" persisted Black John. "You better think it over careful. There's liable to be good money in it."

"I won't have a damn thing to do with it, no matter how much is in it! You've got to go it alone, this time. At that, with what the paper said about that damn cuss, I wouldn't grieve none if he was took back an' hung! Him shootin' his pardner in the back that-a-way to git his horse don't set good on a man's stummick."

"Yeah," agreed Black John, "it does look like he deserved a little bad luck, at that. I'm goin' back to the cabin. See you later!"

IV

WELL," said Black John, as he and his guest finished washing the supper dishes that evening, "guess we might's well mosey on over to Cush's. The boys'll begin driftin' in by now. Did you say this fella yer huntin' knows you by sight, er don't he?"

"No, I don't think he does. The chances are he's never even heard of me. I wasn't working on the case he was convicted for. I don't think it was a federal job, anyhow."

"How come this here bank robbery is a Gov'ment case? I thought the local shuriffs an' police handled jobs like that."

"Well—yes—they generally do. But you see this was a national bank, so they called us in."

"Don't pay to monkey with Uncle Sam, eh?"

"You bet your life it don't! Once they put us on the trail, and we never quit till our man's either dead or behind the bars."

"Hum, if I was this here Webster, I wouldn't take no comfort in the thought."

"Why the hell do you keep calling him Webster? His name's Crawford."

"Shore—Crawford's what I meant. Fact is, I ain't no good hand at remember-in' names. I don't never fergit a face, but a name is different. Take it in a place like Halfaday, it's somehow more liable to change. You say you'd know this party if you seen him?"

"I think I would. I looked up his description."

"Come on, then, we'll be goin'. You kin ondoubtless pick him out amongst the boys. But remember what I told you—if you ain't got the papers, you won't be allowed to take him off Halfaday onless you arrest him acrost the line."

ARRIVING at the saloon Black John sat in a stud game, leaving the other to shift for himself among the dozen or more men who stood drinking and talking at the bar. An hour later he glanced up as a man entered the room and headed for the group. He noticed that Christopher Blue was regarding the newcomer intently, and that Cush was busy serving drinks.

"Hey, Webster," he called, as the man approached the bar, "tell Cush to fetch a round of drinks over here when he gits time, will you?"

The man nodded, and Black John meticulously examined the tip of his hole card. Presently the drinks were served and glancing up he noted that Webster and Blue were drinking together at the end of the bar. Later, they left the room together, and Black John devoted his entire attention to stud.

Long after midnight he cashed in his chips. Neither Webster nor Blue had returned to the saloon, and after a few minutes of general conversation, he proceeded to his cabin to find the light burning and Christopher Blue stowing the last of his few belongings into his packsack.

"You were right," the man stated, "Crawford's too damn smart to be caught across the line. I've got to go clear down to Dawson after those papers."

"You located him, eh?" asked Black John.

The man grinned. "'Sure, I did. Thanks for the tip. But I think I'd have recognized him anyway."

'Tip?"

"Why certainly! You knew I was looking right at him when you called out to him to tell Cush to bring over round of drinks."

"Oh—you mean Webster? So he's this here Crawford you been talkin' about! By God then—I bet that's how come I kep' gittin' them names mixed!"

"It must have been," chuckled the other. "Do you think I can make it back from Dawson in two weeks?"

"Well, that's accordin' to what luck you have. It would be good goin', even if there wasn't no delay about them papers. But how do you know Webster'll be here when you git back? He might git suspicious er somethin' an' pull out on you."

The man smiled. "He'll be here. He won't pull out for anywhere. He thinks he's safe here! Trust us fellows not to pull any boners. How long do you suppose we'd last if we tipped off our hand to a crook? We've got to be able to outguess any kind of a criminal we come across—that's what the Government pays us for."

"Yeah," admitted Black John, "I s'pose that's right. When you figgerin' on pull-in' out fer Dawson?"

"'I'll start at daylight. That's why I was getting my things all ready. I'll just flop down here on the bunk and get a couple of hours' sleep and then I'll be on my way. How much do I owe you?"

"Owe me?"

"Why, yes—for my board and lodging. Don't be afraid to make it enough—the Government pays my expenses. If we settle up now, I won't have to disturb you early in the morning."

"Yer coming back, ain't you?" replied Black John. "There'll be plenty time to talk about expenses the next time I see you. I'm sleepy now. I'm goin' to roll in. So long, if I don't see you in the mornin'."

V

NEXT morning, as Black John stepped into the saloon, Old Cush looked up from his inevitable newspaper, and dropped his eyes to the place he held with a gnarled, black-rimmed forefinger; "What the hell does R E C O N C E N T R A D O S mean?" he demanded, spelling out the word laboriously. "It says here how they're collectin' 'em in them towns down in Cuby."

"Oh—yeah—Cripes, Cush, anyone would think you didn't know nothin' about a war! That there's a new kind of ammunition, they've got. It explodes, an' scatters when it hits."

"It could shore scatter all over hell with the number of letters it takes to spell it," opined Cush. "It's gittin' so a man don't have no chanct at all in a war."

"It's like I was tellin' you," said Black John as he poured himself a drink, "if you had a dictionary you could look up them words fer yerself."

"Well," said Cush somberly, "mebbe I'll have to git one, now that you'll prob'ly be leavin' the crick when them wimmin gits turned loose on you. Up to now I ain't felt the need of one, 'cause it was handier to jest ask you when I come to a word I didn't know. Things ain't goin' to be the same around here with you gone. How much to boot should a man ort to git if he traded a Bible fer a dictionary?"

"W-e-e-l," considered Black John, "you ain't puttin' it quite right. He'd prob'ly have to give boot—about half an ounce, I'd say, offhand."

"Like hell he would! Any damn fool knows a Bible is more Christian to have than a dictionary! I might trade that singin' book my wife had, though. We ain't never found no use fer that. I'd give it an' half an ounce fer a good dictionary. I'll have Red John take it down to Dawson next time he goes, an' make a trade."

"Why don't you jest buy one?" suggested Black John.

"What! An' have three books layin' around? Two's bad enough—but with three books kickin' around on the back bar, a man couldn't find no place to set the glasses! Not by a damn sight! If I git a dictionary that singin' book has got to go."

A SHADOW darkened the doorway as Webster entered the room and walked slowly to the bar.

"Have a drink!" invited Black John. "I'm about to buy one."

Old Cush set out another glass, then the three drank. After an interval Cush indicated the bottle with a jerk of his thumb. "Have one on the house," he suggested as he folded the newspaper and returned it to the back bar.

Presently Webster laid a five dollar bill on the bar. "Fill 'em up agin," he ordered. "That's the last damn cent I've got in the world. We might's well drink it up. How the hell does a man go at diggin' gold?"

"The last cent you've got!" exclaimed Black John. "I thought here a few days

ago you told us you had plenty of money, an' didn't have to work."

"Yeah," retorted the man," that was true when I said it. But it ain't true no more. The facts is, men, I might's well come clean. I was mixed up in that robbery down in Oklahoma. When I hit here I had right around sixty thousan' dollars in good safe bills. Today I ain't got a cent!"

"Sixty thousan'! That's quite a haul fer one man's share. How many of you was there in it?" asked Black John.

"There was five of us. Three of us was jest some damn punks we picked up

in the hills an' left outside to hold the horses, an' fog up the town in case any of the boobs got suspicious. But Curly Jack was a tough guy. Me an' him done the job. The inside part was easy—jest a scairt cashier, an' a scairter gal. We sacked the sixty thousan' in no time, but while we was goin' out one of 'em most touched off the alarm, 'cause when we hit the sidewalk a big gong was bangin' away on top of the bank, an' it seemed like everyone in town was shootin' at us. They got pore Curly, an' the three punks high-tailed it out of town, an' me after 'em with the stuff all safe in the sack.

"Well," he added, with a wink, "we got separated, an' I never did see them punks agin. I went to St. Louie an' then hit fer Seattle by way of Frisco, an' here I be. I thought I was safe here—but last night a fella shows up, an' we gits to drinkin' an' chawin' the rag, here at the bar, an' he tells me he knows of a sweet job we kin pull off an' git away with it easy. Somehow I kind of think I seen his face somewhere before, but I don't place him, an' we goes down to my cabin to talk it over. Then he pulls a gun an' a badge on me—an' it turns out that he's a damn Secret Service man! He'd be'n put on the job, on account that the bank we robbed was a national bank, an' he'd trailed me on from St. Louie clean to here."

"Well, I was in a hell of a fix, on account that I was mixed up in another bank job onct, where a feller was killed an' they railroaded me to Walla Walla fer the long stretch. Last year I crushed out—an' this guy has got all the dope on me. I tells him he ain't got no right to arrest me on Canadian territory, an' if he thinks I'm goin' onto the American side, he's a fool. He shoves the gun up agin my belly an' kind of digs it in till it hurts, an' he kind of grins an 'he says how he wouldn't be half as big a fool as I'd be if I didn't take a little walk with him jest about a mile up the gulch."

"It looks like he's got me no matter which way the cat jumps, because if he pulls that trigger the gun don't make no noise up agin my belly that way, an' no one would know who done it but me, an' I'd be dead. So I starts to dicker with him. I offers him half the sixty thousan' if he'll go away an' claim he never found me, an' he pertends to do some thinkin', an' then says, 'All right, fork it over.' I've got the stuff hid in a place I found in the wall, where part of a log comes out when you pull out a peg, so I digs up the roll, an' counts him off thirty thousan'. An' then what does the crooked, double-crossin' son of a bitch do but says that, come to think it over, it's worth the hull sixty thousan' to sacrifice his honor!

"I squawks like hell, an' then he tells me that that damn Curly Jack claimed before he croaked that it was me that shot him to git his horse, an' I'd never see Leavenworth if I was took back, but I would stretch a rope instead. He even squawked when he counted the roll an' found it was short what money I'd used out of it. An' he went through my pockets an' took everything but that lousy five spot layin' there on the bar. It was fifty-nine thousan' two hundred an' twenty bucks that he took—an' he leaves me a five!"

"Well, at that," said Black John, "it was more'n you left them three punks that got away. An' he didn't shoot you in the back, like you done Curly."

"You been talkin' to this guy!" exclaimed the man accusingly.

FOR answer Black John pointed to the folded newspaper. "It's in the paper, there. When we read that piece, we know'd you was this Crawford, on account you told us you was suspected of a bank robbery in Oklahoma."

Old Cush pushed the paper toward the man, who read the story, and shoved the paper back. "Well," he growled, "with only one horse left, it was him er me for it. Why in hell wouldn't I kill him?

"Tell me now—how do you go about diggin' this here gold?"

Black John cleared his throat. "Like

I told you when you got here—what a man done before he come to Halfaday ain't none of our business, but after he gits here he's got to keep moral, er git hung, whichever he prefers. So if they've got a law down there in Oklahoma agin robbin' banks an' shootin' folks in the back, that's their business, an' it's up to them to punish you fer it, if they kin ketch you. Likewise, yer double-crossin' them three pals ain't none of our business. But you, yerself, admitted havin' gone down to yer cabin fer the express purpose, to wit, of plottin' a crime with this here Blue, before you know'd he was an officer of the law. Now plottin' to commit a crime is, *per se,* in an' of itself a crime on Halfaday, it constitutin' skullduggery. An' when a man further complicates such skullduggery with the crime of bribin' a United States officer in the discharge of his dooty, he couldn't hardly expect to escape a speedy hangin' on Halfaday."

"But good God, man! He had a gun borin' right into my guts—an' it was cocked! An' there was a look in his eye that meant business!"

"Um-hum," replied Black John, "an' you'll ondoubtless see the same kind of a look in our eye, when we call the miners' meetin', an' the boys hears me read that piece to 'em there in the paper. It couldn't be used as direct evidence agin you on Halfaday—but it is admissible, under our code, as character evidence. The boys sets quite a bit of store by character evidence—as some of our most interestin' hangin's could attest."

"Do you mean, that after gittin' robbed by that damn crook, you'd hang me besides? Damn him! If he hadn't throw'd my gun in the river, I'd have shot him last night when he went out with that money!"

BLACK JOHN nodded. "You'd of been perfectly safe in doin' that," he said. "We couldn't hang you but the onct. The boys is busy right now down to their claims, an' I've got to go out an' git me a moose. The piece I've got hangin' is kind of fly-blow'd an it's a mite high. I'll stop along up the crick an' tell the boys about the meetin,' an' tonight we'll hang you an' git it over with. We was jest sayin' the other day, we hadn't had no hangin' in damn near a fortnight. That's the way it goes, though. Seems like they come in waves. Sometimes we don't have none fer almost a month, an' then we'll pull off a batch of 'em. It's good weather now—we could hold yourn outdoors. It'll keep the boys from gittin' res'less. Well, so long ontil this evenin'. I got to git me that moose."

Stepping behind the bar, Black John picked up a rifle, and walked out through the trading room. Half an hour later, through the old brass telescope that always stood conveniently near the door, he and Old Cush watched a canoe, its single occupant paddling frantically, disappear around a far bend of the creek.

"Shootin' his pardner in the back!" said Cush. "It would served him right if we had of hung him!"

"Yeah," agreed Black John, "but under the circumstances, it wouldn't hardly of been ethical. When you come to think it over, there was somethin' to be said on his side of the case, on that bribery charge. A man of his caliber couldn't hardly be expected to stand steadfastly fer the right, with a cocked gun borin' into his guts. We're well shet of him. He ain't goin' to linger on Halfaday."

"That's right, an' if he keeps up the lick he's goin' now, he'll be overtakin' that Secret Service man—an' him without no gun."

"Mebbe."

"What time did that other fella start out?" asked Cush. "An' didn't you think it was funny he'd be goin' back so quick without his man?"

"No," replied Black John, "he kind of slipped one over on me, I guess. You see, he told me last night he'd seen his man an' figgered he was too smart to be caught acrost the line. I'd already told

him he couldn't arrest no one on Halfaday without the papers, so he said he was goin' down to Dawson an' git 'em. Then when I got up this mornin' he was gone."

"An' all that money along with him," murmured Old Cush sadly, his eyes on the far bend of the creek. "How much did Webster say it was?"

"Fifty-nine thousan' two hundred an' twenty dollars, all told. You'll remember he left Webster a five spot."

"Yeah—it's layin' there yet on the bar. When you stepped into the storeroom Webster shot out the front door without even waitin' fer his change."

"Did he put that name slip back in the can?"

"Hell—no! He didn't wait fer nothin'."

"All right, give me a pencil an' a piece of paper, an' I'll replace it. Beats hell all the trouble a chechako'll put a man to. An' while yer about it, set the dice box on the bar an' we'll shake fer that extry change. He had three an' a half comin'. He only bought the one round, an' I wouldn't want you should git balled up in yer cash."

"I'll take a chanct," said Old Cush dryly as he picked up the bill and slipped it into the till. "Here's the box. I'll shake you fer the drinks."

V

ONE morning, a week after the departure of Webster from Halfaday Creek, Black John, rifle in hand, stepped into the saloon to find Old Cush arranging the glasses on the back bar. "Fill me up a flask, Cush," he ordered. "I'm goin' out an' git me a moose. Been threatenin' to fer a week, but now I've got plumb down to the shank of that quarter I've had hangin'."

"Huh," grunted Cush, reaching beneath the bar for a leather covered pocket flask, "it's about time you was gittin' some fresh meat. That chunk you give the klooch yeste'day to bile up fer me stunk."

"Yeah," grinned Black John, "that's why I give it to her. My stummick ain't what it used to be. If I don't show up fer a few days, don't worry. I figger to swing over to the White, an' prospect a little in that long box canyon over there by the falls."

Old Cush paused in the act of filling the flask from a bottle and eyed the other intently. "You gone crazy er somethin'?" he asked. "You know damn well there ain't nothin' in that box canyon, an' never was. It's all hard rock, an' what little dirt there is don't go down more'n a couple of foot, at the most. It's all top-wash stuff."

"Ort to be easy to prospect then," grinned Black John, "if it don't go down no further'n that. A man wouldn't have to sink no deep shaft."

"A man would be a damn fool to even look at it. There's been a dozen tried it in there, an' they all come right down agin the rock without even strikin' a color. Even a chechako would know enough to stay out of that canyon!"

"I wonder!" said Black John, as he stowed the flask in his pocket. "If that's the case, mebbe I won't do no good over there, after all. Well—so long. I'll be seein' you."

THE steep, tumultuous rapid of the White River known as "The Falls" lay some fifteen miles due south of Cushing's Fort, on Halfaday. Ascending to the rim, Black John struck off at a leisurely pace through the ridge country. "Let's see," he figured half-aloud, "it would take him one day on Halfaday, an' three days up the White, then a good three days to the end of the box canyon, an' three days back down it—that's ten days, seven of which has passed. Today will make eight. That'll give me two days' leeway, in case he might of traveled a mite faster'n what I figgered. I don't mind it, though. Couple days' rest don't hurt no one now an' then. It's good fer a man to sort of lay around out in a country like this—with the hills, an' the rivers, an' the woods,

an' all. Sort of warms the cockles of his heart toward God an' his fella man. I wonder if that damn cuss could of got mixed up an' took off up the wrong canyon?"

Arriving at the falls late in the afternoon, he noted that Blue's canoe lay overturned on the beach. Intensive exploration for a short distance up the box canyon satisfied him that the man had passed on up, so Black John proceeded to make himself comfortable in a cozy camp just within the canyon's mouth where no one could pass out unnoticed. Possessing the patience of an Indian, Black John sat for two days with his back to a rock, dozing, whittling, smoking. Along in the mid-forenoon of the third day, he cut a pole, tied on a line he took from his pocket, and started to fish in the pools below the falls, using a strip of pork rind for bait. It was while thus engaged that a loud hail drew his gaze to the man who, pack on his back, was just emerging from the mouth of the box canyon.

Recognition was mutual. "Well," cried Black John heartily, retrieving half a dozen small fish he had strung on a forked willow, "damn if it ain't my old friend, Chris! What the hell did you do—hit off up the wrong canyon?"

"Wrong canyon—hell! I went up the right hand canyon, just like you told me——"

"The right hand canyon!" exclaimed Black John, his eyes widening. "No wonder you didn't git nowheres. I told you the left."

"You did not! You said the right—and repeated it two or three times."

BLACK JOHN shook his head. "Well," he said, "there ain't no use fightin' about it. I still think you misonderstood me. But of course it might be such a thing as I mis-spoke myself. I ain't one of these guys that claims they're always right. Anyone might make a mistake that way—but I ain't apt to."

"You sure did that time," said the man, apparently somewhat mollified. "Because I'm positive you said the right hand canyon. A man would hardly make a mistake in a matter of life and death, would he?"

"Well," replied Black John, "some has. But it ain't as bad as all that—yet. You've still got grub enough to take you to the police post. If you ain't I kin spare you the difference. Set down a while now an'

rest up whilst I fry us a batch of fish. You must be hungry—an' I feel like it's kind of my fault."

"No real harm done, I guess," admitted the man, as he settled the packsack from his shoulders. "But what the hell are you doing way over here?"

"Oh, jest projectin' around. I cut acrost from Halfaday afoot. But howcome you're here? You told me you was goin' to hit down to Dawson an' git them papers so you could arrest that there Crawford?"

"That's what I intended to do when I left your place that morning, but on the way down Halfaday, I figured that it would be better to hit out to the coast—Skagway or some place where I could get in touch by cable directly with Ottawa, and at the same time get in touch with my own chief in Washington."

"I see," said Black John, grinning into the other's face. "You're still figgerin' on comin' back to Halfaday then?"

"Of course I am!" retorted the man, with a touch of asperity. "I've got to go back and get Crawford, haven't I?"

"Crawford! He ain't on Halfaday no

more. He took out, hell atearin', about noon of the same day you left."

"Took out! Where did he go to?"

"He didn't leave no address. Didn't even wait fer his change from a five dollar bill he laid on the bar fer a round of drinks."

"What the hell got into him, I wonder?"

"I couldn't say—onlest it was fear of some kind. He looked scairt. An' the way he was paddlin' down the crick, he acted scairt, too."

For several minutes the only sound was that of the fish sizzling in the pan. "In that case," said Blue, "there wouldn't be any sense in my going back to Halfaday."

"No," agreed Black John, "quite the contrary."

"I might as well settle up with you then for that little board bill."

"Any time yer ready."

"How much is it? Let's see—there was supper that night, and the bed, and I took a bunch of those cold sinkers for breakfast. How much?"

"Altogether," said Black John, "it amounts to jest fifty-nine thousan', two hundred an' twenty dollars—not countin' this here meal I'm cookin'."

"What!" Quick as a flash, the man's hand flew to a shoulder holster that showed beneath his open coat. But it halted abruptly without grasping the gun, as his eyes focussed on the muzzle of the big black forty-five that was trained exactly upon the center of his midriff.

"Jest h'ist 'em a little higher, Chris," ordered a cold, hard voice behind the gun, "an' I'll save you the trouble of drawin' it."

AS HE spoke, Black John reached with his left hand, drew the gun from its holster, and tossed it into the river. "I'm lettin' you keep yer badge," he added with a grin. "It must of cost you a good fifty cents at some badge store."

"This is an outrage!" cried the man, his face a pasty white. "Do you realize that you're attempting to rob the United States Government?"

"Nope," replied Black John, "I don't. Even if I was, it wouldn't be the first time. But this here partic'lar transaction ain't no robbery at all—it's merely the collection of an honest debt. You told me not to be afraid to make it enough—an' I ain't. Hold on, a minute, while I git that money out of yer pack. Yeah—here it is. Wait till I count it." Very deliberately, still keeping the man covered, Black John counted the bills. "Correct to a cent," he announced, transferring them to his own pack. "An' now the fish is ready. If you stick around fer this meal, it'll be thirty-five cents more. Hell—I'm givin' you all the breaks, at that. If I was to take you back to Halfaday the boys would hang you in a minute—robbery, armed, would be the charge. If I was you, I'd hit out fer the coast."

"I'll get you for this—damn you!" cried the infuriated man. "You'll learn that you can't fool with the Government!"

"Yeah!" grinned Black John, as the other shouldered his pack, and struck off up the left hand canyon, "When you come back to do it, don't fergit to fetch along the proper papers. You might have to go down to Dawson fer 'em—er mebbe clean back to the coast!"

VI

IN THE midafternoon four days later Black John beached his canoe, ascended the bank, stepped into Cushing's saloon, and swung his packsack to the floor in front of the bar.

Old Cush greeted him with a grin as he set out bottle and glasses. "How do you like that box canyon by now?" he asked.

"I guess there ain't nothin' there," admitted Black John as he poured his drink. "I fetched a prime quarter of moose fer you, though. It's in the canoe."

"Canoe! I thought you hit out acrost country?"

"Yeah, I did. But I come back in the canoe. It was the one that there Christopher Blue come to Halfaday in. An' by the way, before I fergit it stick this in the

safe fer me, an' don't fergit to make a note of it in the book. It figgers up to fifty-nine thousan' two hundred an' twenty dollars. It's all there. I counted it."

Old Cush's eyes seemed to fairly bulge from their sockets as the packages of bills thudded onto the bar. "The money he got off'n Webster!" he exclaimed. "But—good God, John, how come you to have it? It's be'n a couple of weeks sence he left here!"

"Yeah, I met up with him over to the box canyon. He was comin' on out while I was fishin' there in them holes below the falls."

"But what the hell was he doin' up the box canyon?"

"Jest walkin'. He claimed he'd went up to the end of it, an' back."

Old Cush shook his head somberly as he eyed the packages of bills. "You'll have the hull United State Gov'mint pilin' in on us, now," he said. "You'd ort to know'd better'n to rob a Secret Service man!"

"Rob!" exclaimed Black John, a pained expression creeping into his eyes. "Why, Cush, you'd ort to know that I wouldn't rob no one—leastwise not in the White River country. It wouldn't be ethical. An' as fer bein' a Secret Service man—Chris Blue wasn't no more one of 'em than you be. In the first place, Secret Service men don't handle nothin' but conterfeitin' an' guardin' the President. They're under the treasury department. The department of jestice handles all other cases. An' besides, when did the Secret Service start tellin' their name an' their business to everyone they met up with along a crick? An' when did they start wearin' a big tin badge in under their shirt—like a country constable?"

"But—Webster thought he was a Secret Service man, er why would he of turned over them bills to him?"

"Webster, er Crawford, rather—his eggication had ondoubtless been neglected, er he'd of know'd about that, same as I did. The way I figger, this here Blue was mebbe a prisoner in Walla Walla, er mebbe a screw there when Crawford was doin' his time. That way he would know him by sight. An' then after readin' about this robbery in the paper, he run acrost Crawford in St. Louis, an' trailed him clean to here, an' then took him fer his roll. Secret Service—hell!"

"But what was he doin' in the box canyon?"

"Oh, that was jest some kind of a mistake. You see, when we was talkin' down the crick, that day he come, he was askin' me if there wasn't no short-cut out of the country, an' I told him about the Dalton Trail. Seems like, one of us kind of got mixed up about them canyons, er somethin'. He claimed it was me."

"Well—I'll be damned!" muttered Old Cush, as he stowed the money in the safe, and made a certain notation in his book. "Then there wasn't no Secret Service about it, eh?"

"None," grinned Black John, "except what I done, fer the good of Halfaday. That was a kind of secret service. I offered to let you in on it, Cush. You hadn't ort to turned it down. I told you the pay would be good. Half them bills would been yourn."

Go-getter Yeargen's Fame As a Man-taker Was Wide; Cheyenne Red's Reputation As a Man-killer Was Equally So

Battle in the Bad Lands

By G. W. BARRINGTON

Author of Many Thrilling and Authentic Stories of the West

Chapter I

THE GO-GITTER

PEGLEG STEVENS, proprietor of the Elite Saloon and Billiard Parlor, polished a whiskey glass on a corner of his none-too-clean apron and looked dejectedly out at the sun-glared square around which were clustered the business establishments of the little rangeland town of Snakebend —so named because it was the metropolis of a rugged section of northwestern Nebraska through which wound the tortuous Snake River.

It was late afternoon of a lazy spring day. Not more than half a dozen sweaty-backed cow ponies stamped flies in the warm sunshine before the Elite and Dutch Schwerengen's general merchandise store opposite. Unworried by patrons, the feed-lot man dozed on a bench beneath the wooden awning fronting his little coop of an office. The ring of a hammer in the blacksmith shop down the block was the only evidence of activity anywhere about town.

Inside Pegleg's booze-stunk, tobacco-fumed place, there were no bar patrons. Bill Boggs, town loafer and expert moocher, played a listless game of bottle pool

with a pink-shirted puncher from the Tumbling T outfit, but there was no profit in that for Pegleg; Bill never was known to have a cent and the puncher was beating him with monotonous regularity. In a corner at the rear, a bearded rancher who already had drunk too much snored noisily with his head resting on a greasy card table. Three more loafers watched the pool game with mild interest. Not a penny was leaving anyone's pocket.

Pegleg's shrimpy little face lightened and his pale, squinty eyes glistened hopefully when hurrying hoofbeats pounded across the rock outcrop of the incline that rose from the river bottom west of town. That bit of hard land was the enunciator that notified Pegleg and the storekeepers that business was about to pick up. For, riding or driving from west, north or south, it was the only entrance to the drab little town. The ford was there and other ingress was barred by a sheer rock bluff that left the river bank a little way below town and semi-circled to meet it more than twenty miles upstream. To eastward of town the road was an open trail that wound through brown, conical sandhills till it reached the Platte valley, a hundred miles to the southeast.

LISTENING hopefully, Pegleg heard the galloping hoofbeats subside to a soft padding as they took to the sandy footing of Main Street. A minute later, spurs jingled and bootheels chugged on the plank walk out front and the green shutter door creaked open to admit a big, square-jawed, slow-moving man with a star pinned to the breast of his blue flannel shirt. Behind him stalked a dark, chuffy-bodied man with full-lidded eyes and a red, beaked nose, who wore a similar badge. The first was Sam Lannigan, sheriff of the county; the other was Dave Pringle, Lannigan's chief deputy.

Both riders were smudged with gray-white alkali dust. The sheriff's rugged face was strained with fatigue and his placid blue eyes were red-rimmed from sun-glare and loss of sleep. Pringle's body was sweat-sodden, but his dark, stolid face with its puffy-lidded eyes was expressionless. "Iron Man Pringle" they called him, and with good reason; for, though he often stayed in saddle from dawn to dusk, he never had been known to declare himself tired, nor had his masklike countenance ever registered pain or suffering or simple discomfort.

Pegleg stumped obsequiously to the front as the two approached the bar. "'Lo, Lannigan! Howdy, Pringle! Whatchu gonna have?"

Lannigan jerked his sandy head in short greeting and Pringle grunted an acknowledgement of the salutation. "Straight red-eye at one elbow an' a cold bottle of beer at th' other," the sheriff ordered, smiling whimsically. "B-r-r-r! I'm plumb baked out in th' guts, an' it's gonna take me a hour or two t' git lickerated proper.

"Give Pringle th' same lay-out. His stummick's chapped too, but he's too cussed clost-mouthed to say so."

"Comin' right up," Pegleg chirped cheerfully, as he deftly skidded a whiskey glass to the elbow of each and turned to get the bar bottle. "From th' way you two look, a little first aid won't do neither of yuh no harm. Been out tryin' to round up them all-th'-year-'round rustlers?"

"Rustlers, hell!" Lannigan growled.

HE THREW down his ounce of fiery whiskey at a gulp, then drank gurglingly from the frosty beer bottle. His burning thirst assuaged somewhat, he sipped luxuriously with the bottle in one corner of his mouth while he mumbled out of the other, "Rustlers, hell! I've had 'em in my hair fur so long it ain't excitin' no more. What I got on my mind now is somethin' really worth talkin' 'bout." He finished the bottle with an eloquent "a-a-ah" of supreme enjoyment and drew the back of a hairy hand across his mouth. "Th' up stage was helt up over by Clear Creek last evenin', an' forty thousan' dollars in good money carried off," he an-

nounced, as he jammed the empty bottle viciously down on the bar. "One lone jasper done it—an' done a damn good job at that."

"Whew-e-e!" Pegleg ejaculated. "Le's see, Ol' Jim Linton was a-drivin', wasn't he? Third time he's been helt up in four months. If this thing keeps up, he'll git to thinkin' that——"

"Jim won't git held up no more 'less the Angel Gabriel does it," the sheriff said, shaking his sandy head solemnly. "Th' facts bein' as yuh say, Jim 'peared to git peevish. Mebbe thought it wasn't his turn. Anyway, Jim went fur his smokestick, an' th' jasper behin' th' mask chilled him—plugged him square betwixt th' eyes. Then th' onhuman galoot collected th' moneybags an' mail sack an' moseyed off inta them rock gullies, headin' southeast. Before leavin' out, though, he shot th' stage hawses to keep any of th' passengers from carryin' th' news to town right away. We found where he'd tied his hoss in a dry wash whilst he done th' job. Th' empty mail sack was there—tha's all. It's all hard land out that-a-way, so he didn't leave no sign."

"Whew-e-e!" Pegleg whistled again. "Some nervy hombre, at that." There was just a shade of irony in his voice as he added, "Looks like he'd git away clean, too, bein' you already give up an' come in 'thout 'im."

"We come in, but we ain't give up by a long shot," Lannigan declared, brightening a little. "Fact is, I believe we've got that slipp'ry geezer as good as cinched, this time.

"Yuh see, it was this way—give us 'nother bottle, will yuh?—it just happent that Pringle an' Barnes an' Simpson was scoutin' fur rustlers out that-a-way, yesterday. They expected to git back 'fore five o'clock, but stayed out a little later. I got oneasy an' went out to hunt 'em. So we stumbled onto th' stage 'thin half an hour after it had been cleaned, an' was right on that jasper's tail, as a feller might say.

"I rid one way an' Pringle an' th' boys rid th' other. In no time a-tall, we had hustled a bunch of cowpokes an' plugged ev'ry trail over there. If yuh wanta know it, that's what's brung us back here." Lannigan tapped the bar impressively with a sun-cooked forefinger, as he added with slow emphasis:

"Th' galoot that done that robbin' an' killin' can git outa this country on hossback in jus' one way—that's by ridin' right through this man's town. So, if any geezer drifts in, headin' east, me'n Pringle'll be here to——"

THE sheriff left off talking and turned slowly toward the front when Pegleg winked a warning and jerked his bald little head suggestively in that direction. Just inside the shutter, a tall, muscular puncher had stopped to make a casual survey of the place and its occupants. Before the door swung to behind him Pegleg had caught

a glimpse of a big silver-dun saddler tied to an awning post at the edge of the walk.

The pool balls ceased to click, and the players stood motionless, staring at the newcomer, Lannigan and Pringle made only a thin pretense of giving attention to their drinks. Roused by the unwonted stillness that had gripped the sordid little place, the bearded rancher stirred, opened his rum-reddened sodden eyes long enough to remark that it was a hell of a long time between drinks, then slumped back into his stupor. Pegleg wrung his soggy bar towel, abstractedly allowing the moisture from it to drip on his shirt front.

Here was a stranger—a stranger who

needed no one to introduce him as one who would have the physical courage to hold up a stage, alone, if he saw fit to do so. He looked honest enough, but so did the James boys, and Billy The Kid. Anyway, he looked thoroughly capable, though perhaps a bit dandified, according to Snakebend etiquette. He was cleanly shaved and his red hair was neatly brushed. The big silver conchas glittering on his belt and hat-band, the flaring red silk neckcloth caught in a coiled serpent of silver, and the exceptionally fine silk corduroy shirt and breeches had no mates in western Nebraska, though they would have been commonplace enough south of the Canadian. But the plain-butted Frontier Colt swung, butt forward, at his left hip had an aspect that was decidedly businesslike. Also, the gun appeared to belong just where it hung—at the hip of a fellow who would know how to use it.

THE oppressive silence held. Pegleg's rag was moving in a slow, constricted circle on the bar and he dropped his eyes to it in a polite attempt to keep from staring. He didn't look up as the newcomer strode to the bar, his elk-head watch-guard tinkling against his belt buckle with each indolent, deliberate step. Reaching a point opposite the barkeeper, he raised himself to the toes of his picturated Morocco leather boots and revolved slowly, examining his image in the mirror of the back-bar. Pegleg fairly jumped when the stranger spoke unexpectedly. "Seem to be all right," he said, with a relieved look.

"Yeh," Pegleg assured him. "Yuh look plumb all right. Why not?"

"Dunno, exact. From th' way all you bug-eyed gazabos was pointin' your noses at me, I thought maybe my shirttail was out or somethin'.

"Passin' that though, an' after findin' out that yuh can move an' talk, how 'bout a little service?"

"Shore thing. To be certingly. Whatchu gonna have?"

"Straight rye." The puncher hooked a spurred heel on the brass footrail and leaned across the bar to say in a husky whisper that carried the length of the still room: "Reckon these other gents is ready to take a snifter? I s'pose they are; anyway, their mouths is all open."

"This gent is orderin' for th' house," Pegleg announced, with stiff formality

Bill Boggs racked his cue hurriedly and shambled across the room, his bearded face aglow with eager anticipation. The others stood where they were and said nothing. Out of the tail of his eye, Pegleg saw Lannigan whisper something to Pringle, who eased quietly away from the bar and took station by the wall across the room from where the stranger stood. Hurriedly serving his new patron and Bill Boggs, Pegleg craftily toweled his way along the bar until he was within one jump of the big icebox, and waited there for the explosion he was certain would come.

"Here's how," Bill Boggs grinned, tilting his glass, "and luck to yuh."

"Same to you—an' more of it," the puncher returned the courtesy. As he spoke, he transferred his glass from his right hand to his left and turned lazily till he was half facing both Lannigan and Pringle. Suddenly he drilled Lannigan with his keen, steel-blue eyes and snapped a question: "Why don't you say it?"

"Say what?" said the startled officer.

"How th' unadulterated hell do I know?" the big puncher came back. "All I'm shore of is that you gape at me like I had two heads or a pair of horns. Also you jus' sent that grumpy-lookin' helper of yourn aroun' where he could git a tailholt if you an' me locks horns. I'm admittin' that I ain't what a feller might call plumb manshy, but I kinda object to them 'rangements. If you got somethin' in your craw, why doncha spit it right out? I'm listenin'."

"So am I," said Lannigan, roused by the scorn in that slow, even voice. "Fact is, it's you, not me, that's due to make some talk." He took two long steps, stop-

ping within a yard of the imperturbed puncher to snap, "What's yur name?"

"Dave Holbrook—Red Holbrook, th' boys calls me. What's yourn?"

"Lannigan—sheriff here. Where yuh from?"

"North Platte—Cody ranch, most recent. Before that, rid fur th' T. B. Hoard outfit over in th' sandhills. Anything else?"

"Yeh. Which way yuh ridin'?"

"East."

Lannigan's face darkened. "Oh, yuh are, are yuh? An' where did yuh camp, las' night?"

THE puncher tilted his big flat-rimmed hat aside to scratch his fiery thatch thoughtfully. "Les'see. Badger Holler I think that rancher feller called th' place —big cedar gorge with a rock bluff on three sides of it. One hell of a pretty place, but a hard one to git a hoss inta an' out of.

"Why? I didn't leave no fire git out an' do no damage, did I?"

Ignoring the question, Lannigan asked another. "How do I know yuh bedded down in th' Holler?"

Red's face flushed and his keen, steel-blue eyes glinted dangerously. "'Cause I'm tellin' yuh I did—an' that's a plenty."

Lannigan scratched his square chin dubiously, then crossed the room in answer to a signal from Pringle. The two drew into a corner and whispered for a little time. When the sheriff came back to the bar his manner was heavy. "Reckon I'll hafta hold yuh," he said resolutely. Then he added, half apologetically, "Course yuh may be awright, but I ain't takin' no chances. A bloody murder an' rob'ry was c'mitted over west there las' night. If, as yuh tell it, yuh camped in th' Holler, that lets yuh out, 'cause yuh couldn't a-got from there to where th' crime was did—even if yuh went afoot, which th' geezer didn't.

"But how do I know that yuh did camp in Badger Holler, las' night?"

"'Cause I say so," the puncher said again, then straightened slowly and locked eyes with the officer. "You're a sheriff, so I've answered yuh questions plumb free an' full," he said soberly. "But when it comes to takin' me anywheres, that's diff'rent. I jus' wasn't raised that way. If yuh gotta morgue, I may go there. But I ain't goin' to no jail, an' that's flat an' final."

There was another pregnant silence. Both men stiffened, their eyes locked. Having plenty of courage, but hesitating to kill, Lannigan waited, probably hoping that the other would weaken. Pegleg stumped around the corner of the big ice-box and peered cautiously out, ready to duck back when things broke. The pink-shirted puncher and the loafers by the wall eased along the wall out of the probable line of fire. "I'm takin' yuh," Lannigan said determinedly, dropping his hand toward his hip.

"Maybe so," Red came back with equal determination. "Course you two geezers has gotta crossfire on me, an' yuh may think yuh got me close-penned. But when either of you crooks a elbow, we'll see what we can see through some smoke. I'm bettin' that both of you won't be on your feet when th' noise stops."

"Have it yur own way," Lannigan said, exasperated at last by the other's stubborn defiance. "Nobody kin say I didn't give yuh a chanct to come along peaceable an' orderly. Yuh won't have it that-a-way, so——"

"Just a minute, gents!"

THE sheriff whirled on his heel and stared at the shutter again. This time, it was a little iron-gray man with a close-cropped mustache and horn-rimmed, thick-lensed glasses who had entered unobserved. He was either a preacher or a gambler, Pegleg decided, after noting the long-tailed frock coat, black hat and white shirt with a turned-down starched collar and thin black bow tie.

"Powder burns quick," the little man said as he came a step nearer, "but cool thinkin' takes a long time." He directed

his remarks to the sheriff. "I heard this man tell yuh that he camped in Badger Holler last night. Well, he did. Leastwise, somebody did. I saw a fire down in there last night an' again this mornin'."

"Eh?" The sheriff gaped in apparent surprise, then appeared struck by a sudden thought. "Oh, yuh did, eh?" he snapped. "Wal, not knowin' yuh any better'n I do him, I'm askin' plumb pointed who yuh are, an' whatchu was doin' out there."

The little man's eyes blazed through the thick lenses. "An' I'm answerin' plumb pointed that's none of yuh damn business," he came back promptly.

"Oh, it ain't eh?" The easy-going sheriff's temper flared beyond control at last. "Hell's fire!" he roared, glaring first at one stranger, then at the other. "How many more smart pilgrims do yuh reckon is gonna ramble inta this man's town an' tell me where to head in? I've took all I'm gonna off of you rovin' mavericks. Nex' thing I'm gonna take is your hides.

"Crack down on 'im, Pringle, while I show this puncher feller how I——

"Ugh!—Why, damn yuh, I'll—*Ugh!"*

THE sheriff had drawn his right-hand gun with the speed of an expert. But as the frowning muzzle of the heavy six left its holster, the puncher's gun appeared to leap out of its own volition, and rap Lannigan's knuckles sharply. The sheriff's weapon roared deafeningly in the close-walled place, then dropped to the sawdust-littered floor—followed, seconds later by the second gun he had drawn.

"Take your time an' an' think it over careful," the puncher said coolly, while the big officer stood panting and glaring. "I'm puttin' it right up to yuh to decide how much chanct yuh got to——"

Over by the wall, a billiard cue clattered to the floor and bootheels scraped as the pink-shirted puncher whirled to draw. He jerked to a stop and stood rigid, licking his dry lips, after a slug from Red's gun had gashed the peaked crown of his hat. "Le's have order 'mongst th' spectators," Red cautioned, sidling along the bar to bring all of them to his front. "This show's gittin' good, an' we don't want none of you bug-eyed jaspers to interfere with th' program."

Meanwhile Pringle and the little iron-gray man had been settling their differences in a somewhat different way. Disdaining to draw his gun on such a seemingly fragile adversary, the deputy had stepped forward and attempted to clutch the other's collar. The little iron-gray man shrank back till Pringle had leaned off-balance in an effort to reach him. Then he reversed suddenly, coming in with pantherish speed. Every ounce of him was riding a slashing uppercut that landed full on the point of the officer's pug jaw. There was a sharp crack and the deputy's head snapped back and his knees sagged. For seconds he swayed groggily, his soles patting the floor with little dabbing steps as he tried vainly to close. Then the little iron-gray man measured him off with a casual jab with his slender left arm and brought his right around in a full sweep.

A hard little fist landed behind Pringle's left ear sending his squat body spinning against the wall. Out on his feet, he rested there for a moment as a sack of grain would rest against the side of a barn. Then he folded slowly, joint by joint and huddled grotesquely face downward in the sawdust, motionless save for the convulsive opening and closing of his pudgy hands.

THE little iron-gray man surveyed his fallen adversary with a casual glance, then shrugged his trim shoulders and turned toward Red. The ghost of a smile crinkled the corners of his firm mouth as he said, "See you've made good, Cowboy." He cast a darting glance the length of the room, then drew a Colt from beneath his left armpit and motioned with it as he addressed the scowling sheriff. "Just step over there by your enterprisin' pard, will yuh?

"Better line th' rest of 'em up, Cowboy, so's we can keep cases on 'em.

"Where's that barkeepin' feller?"

"Record me as present," Pegleg answered from behind the big icebox. "Th' rules of th' sea is women an' children first! They bein' no women an' children here, cripples gits first choice of positions. Bein' contented where I am, I reckon I'll——"

"Come out here!" the little iron-gray man boomed in a voice that was surprisingly full and strong for one of his size and build. "What's th' matter with yuh, anyway?" he asked disgustedly when Pegleg stumped into sight and pegged his way around the end of the bar. "When a gent drops in here for a drink, he has a right to expect a little attention don't he?"

"Yes, sir," Pegleg answered meekly, smoothing down his soiled apron and catching up the neglected bar towel. "Whatchu gonna have?"

"No rush. As soon as that puncher finishes roundin' up that bunch, we'll see. Right now, gimme some ice water."

WHEN Pegleg produced the glass of water, the little man stepped across to Pringle and rolled him face upward. After dashing water into his face and trickling a little inside the bosom of his shirt, he took off the deputy's belt and threw it back of the bar. "Better shuck th' hardware off th' rest of 'em," he suggested to Red, who had finished ranking them against the wall. "They don't look much fighty, but yuh never can tell what a bunch of rannies is gonna——"

He left off speaking and turned toward the shutter which had banged open to admit a slender girl in a gray flannel riding suit. "What's the matter, Father?" she panted, as soon as she was inside.

"Nothin' much," he answered carelessly, looking a bit uneasy under her accusing gaze. "No real trouble, just a little disagreement over——"

"But there *was* trouble," she disputed, stamping a booted foot imperiously. "I heard shots, and now here are all these men pasted to the wall like so many penguins roosting on a cliff." She raised a dainty, gauntleted hand and leveled an accusing forefinger at him. "I know what's happened. You've been losing your temper again."

"Nothin' of th' kind," he said soothingly and a little sheepishly. "Like I told yuh, it was just a little misunderstandin' that don't 'mount to shucks."

She glanced at Pringle and her oval face paled. "But that man lying there! Is he——?"

"Hell no—beg pardon, Honey. I mean to say he's only kinda slumpylike. Hit my fist with his jaw, an' it seemed to 'fect 'im. You just ease right back over to th' store an' finish buyin' them groceries. I'll be 'long d'rectly."

SHE glanced around the room again, then backed her trim body into the corner by the cigar case. "I'm ready to go when you are," she declared determinedly.

"Awright," he said resignedly. "Ain't no fit place for a lady, but you're th' boss, as per usual." He turned to Red, who had finished his job and stood eyeing the girl with an open admiration that brought a rosy flush to her smooth cheeks. "Got 'em all peeled, Cowboy?"

Red took his eyes off the girl long enough to answer. "Yeh. Th' guns is stacked back of th' bar."

The little man stepped close to the puncher and his voice hardened a little. "Awright, *it's your turn next.*"

"Eh?" Red's firm jaw sagged in sur-

prise and his keen eyes widened. "You mean you wanta take my——?"

"Exactly," the cool, level voice came again. "I want your gun, and I want it *now!*"

"Oh-oh," Pegleg ejaculated, commencing another retreat. "This time, if anybody brings me back frum behin' that box, it'll be th' undertaker!"

But stark surprise stopped Pegleg in his tracks when he heard the little man's voice again. "I'm 'restin' yuh, Cheyenne Red." He drew back his coat lapel, disclosing an officer's shield. "It's been a long chase, Red, but th' jig's up. We start for Cheyenne, plumb pronto. Better come along peaceable."

Once more, Pegleg's sordid little place lapsed into absolute silence. Sheer astonishment held the townsmen gripped. Even the girl appeared surprised as she looked at her father's enigmatic face. The sheriff spat noisily into the sawdust at his feet and muttered uncomprehendingly, "A officer." Regaining his sense slowly, Pringle rolled to his haunches, then to his feet. "A officer," he repeated after the sheriff had said it a second time.

THE puncher flushed hotly and drew back a step. Then he looked at the girl's slender graceful figure, the wealth of copper-glinted hair, the deep violet eyes, the pert little up-turned nose, and finely chiseled mouth. "She's goin' with yuh?" he asked, relaxing a little.

"Yeh."

Red unbuckled his belt and offered it. "Then I'm gonna let yuh take me to Cheyenne or anywheres else—plumb through to hell, if yuh wanta."

"Fine," the little man applauded, holstering his own weapon, and hooking Red's belt over his arm. "Saves hard feelin's an' gun-powder." He turned to Lannigan. "Sorry I got het up an' bucked you feller officers off. Maybe I better explain that I been trailin' this galoot clean acrost th' foothills an' just ketched up with 'im.

"Also, maybe I better tell yuh that I'm Yeargan—deputy United States marshal in th' Wyoming district."

"Yeargen? Yuh—don't—mean——?"

"Yeh. Go-gitter Yeargen's what I'm called. Maybe I've earnt th' name."

"Uh-huh," Lannigan agreed dumbly, then shook his shaggy head in a bewildered way. "But in that case, why th' hell did yuh——?"

"I come down here to take Red back with me. I didn't propose to let yuh jug 'im an' give Nebraska first claim on 'im. That's why they call me Go-gitter. I aim to fetch what I go after—an' I do, most usual."

"I see," Lannigan agreed, still somewhat befuddled at the unexpected turn of events. Then he commenced to look a little aggrieved. "Still an' all for one officer to line up against another'n an'——"

"Sorry. Like my daughter says, I got a kinda snorty temper. It bucked me off when yuh commenced gittin' ready to 'rest *me*. Otherwise, I'd 'a' cracked down on Red first, and let it go at that. No hard feelin's, I hope."

"Reckon not," Lannigan agreed, none too delightedly, then appeared struck by a sudden thought. "You don't figger this Red's th' galoot that's been doin' all this——?"

"Ain't no doubt of it," Yeargen declared, rapping on the bar to signal the gaping Pegleg. "I onderstand your troubles broke out early las' spring—'bout a month after Red oozed down here from Cheyenne. He's a industrious cuss."

"Gawd but I'd liketa have that geezer," Lannigan lamented, looking hungrily at the granite-faced puncher.

"I'll fetch 'im back in 'bout a hundred years," Yeargen promised, turning toward the bar. "I reckon th' government'll be done twistin' his tail by that time." He drew out a massive silver watch and snapped it open and shut. His manner grew suddenly brisk. "Well, fellers, nominate your throat gargle. It's a long trip to th' railroad, an' we gotta be ridin'."

"Well," the girl intervened, her provoca-

tive chin dimple showing. "You appear to having regained normalcy, so I suppose I can safely resume my shopping. Try not to assault anyone during the next half hour. By that time, I hope to have you safely out of town." She shook her radiant head ruefully. "Dear, dear, but taking care of a fighting daddy is a terrible responsibility!"

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" Yeargen guffawed in a voice a dozen sizes too large for him, as she hooked the loop of her fringed quirt over her slender wrist and tripped out. "Claims I'm a quarrelsome cuss, eh? Just boun' to make out that I'm a fightin' man! That's one on me, an' I'm buyin' plumb cheerful." He stopped to eye the motley bunch assembling at the bar soberly, then added, "An' I'll lick th' unrefined stuffin' outa any benighted human that don't step up an' drink my daughter's health, plumb enthusiastic!"

"I been tendin' bar thirty years, come January, an' I've always made it a strict rule not to drink whilst I'm on duty," Pegleg explained, as he busily commenced to crack ice. "But I'm happy to make an exception in this here case," he added hastily when he saw the frown that had commenced to crease Yeargen's smooth forehead.

Chapter II

PALAVER

WHEN Yeargen's little cavalcade wound out of Snakebend, it was in an atmosphere akin to that of a farewell reception. A dense crowd had gathered as if by magic. "Crawled outa th' cracks in th' sidewalks," Pegleg declared. Go-getter Yeargen's fame as a man-taker was wide; Cheyenne Red's reputation as a man-killer was equally so. One had been known throughout the West as an officer who always took his man, the other as a man whom no officer could take. It was a simile for that old range paradox, "Th' hoss that can't be rode, an' th' man that can't be throwed." Lining the narrow hoof-cupped street, all able-bodied Snakebenders jostled each other to miss no detail of the parading of the two notables.

Lannigan had regained his good humor, and paid unstinted tribute to a more successful brother officer. "Shake hearty," he said to Yeargen, as the marshal was mounting his roach-maned roan. "I'd like to took 'im myself; but bein's I didn't, I dunno another man that I'd rather had done it."

Pringle was even more enthusiastic. "Lifted a big load off of us boys," he grinned—a little crookedly because of his swollen jaw. "We've rid down a hull herd of good hosses durin' th' last few weeks hunting that gazabo. Now we kin go fishin' for a spell."

"I wouldn't for a while yet," Yeargen suggested, then motioned the sheriff and the deputy to the roan's withers and leaned down to whisper. "I got 'im, but I ain't got th' money. It's somewheres out there in them bad lands, shore as shootin', an' we gotta dig it out."

"Have yuh searched 'im?" Lannigan asked, eyeing the prisoner balefully.

"Nope—no use. Yuh kin see with half a eye he ain't got that bale of mazuma on 'im. He didn't fetch it out, so it's in there somewheres. If I was you, I'd give that patch of rock-wash country a damn good combin'." He lowered his voice still more. "Fact is, I ain't gonna take 'im plumb through to Cheyenne. When I git 'im to th' railroad—couple days from now—I'm gonna turn 'im over to some other fellers an' shag right back here. If you haven't found th' cache by that time, I'm gonna try my luck."

"Think yuh kin dig it out?" Lannigan asked a little skeptically.

"Wal, yuh know they call me 'Go-gitter.' Maybe they's a reason." He straightened and waved a gauntleted hand, as he reined the roan around. "So long, folks, we gotta be shaggin' along.

"Prod them packmules a little, will yuh, Ruthie! I wanta hit Antelope Crick afore dark."

THEY trailed down the street between fringes of gaping townfolk, Yeargen leading the way, his rifle across his lap. Two gray mules followed, one burdened with tent, utensils and bedding, the other with supplies. Red trailed after the mules, his big silver-dun nipping petulantly at their rumps when they lagged. His hands were free, but his horse wore no bridle, and a lead rope circled its neck and was looped collarwise about the neck of the mule ahead. The girl brought up the rear on her pert chestnut filly. An ivory-butted six swung in her saddle holster and Red's gun-belt was looped over her saddlehorn.

"Ain't yuh gonna hawg-tie 'im?" Lannigan cupped his big red hands to his mouth to bellow, as they started.

"Nope, not till we camp," Yeargen twisted about in saddle to boom back. He smiled confidently as he added, "Ruthie'll put a crimp in 'im if he tries to break herd on us. If she misses——" He patted the heavy rifle suggestively and started the roan into a steady, swinging jog. Patting up dun dust with their rhythmically padding feet, the trailwise brutes fell into their stride and turned off Main Street into the twisted trail that meandered out among the brown conical dunes.

For a time, the only sounds on the sun-glared trail were the soft padding of hooves on the soft footing, the subdued creak of saddle leather, the light tinkle of spurs and the jingle of bit chains. Occasionally Yeargen glanced back through his thick lenses, as a general turns to survey his marching army. Even when he looked ahead, Red had a feeling that the alert old fellow knew what was going on behind him. "K-double-e-n," the big puncher muttered admiringly, after they had gone a little way. "Knows if I make a break, I'd hafta bust ahead to git slack an' throw off this rope; so I'd be comin' his way, an' not hers." He twisted about in saddle and favored her with a slow grin. "Hot, ain't it?" he remarked by way of making conversation.

"Ride on," she prompted icily, evidently noting that the dun was dragging a little on the lead rope—Red was slyly pinching his neck with his knees.

"See I was mistaken," Red admitted, pretending to shiver, after glancing at her stony countenance. "I just thought it was hot. It ain't; it's plumb icy."

"Keep that horse moving then," she suggested stiffly. "The exercise will keep him from catching cold."

"Much 'bliged—shore am," he admitted amiably, touching the horse lightly with his spurred heel. "Step up, Ginger ol' boy, inta a pleasanter climate. Them mules looks like they might be friendly cusses. If they ain't, we won't lose nothin'."

"Be impertinent if you like," she came

back indifferently. "Anything so you don't cause delay."

"That reminds me of a story," he said chattily, checking the protesting dun slightly and turning to face her again. "A feller was gonna be hung an' th' keepers was takin' 'im outa th' jailhouse, when he——"

"Pardon me, but I'll not trouble you to tell that story, good as it may be. If you'll kindly——"

"No trouble atall," he assured her blandly. "I was riz not to call anything a trouble that was a favor to a lady.

"As I was sayin', they was takin' this feller outa th' jail house to hang 'im, when, bein' a little rattled maybe, he stumbled an' kinda sagged against th' fellers that was leadin' 'im. Th' sheriff was marchin' ahead an' he looked back an' sez——"

"Really, you needn't bother to——"

"Not a bit of bother. Glad to accommodate. "Hey, feller', sez th' sheriff, 'step along there, an' don't delay th'——'"

"If you please, I'd prefer that you didn't——"

"Kind of yuh to try to save my wind, but I got a plenty. 'Don't delay th' proceedin',' sez th'——"

"I'll not listen, even if you——"

"——Sheriff, scowlin' back along th' line. 'Hey there, yourself, yuh stingy son-of-a-gun,' sez th' feller. 'If you was in my place——'"

"Not listening."

"'Yuh wouldn't be in such a all-fired hurry.'

"Pretty durn good story, eh? Also, if yuh'll consider it some judgmatical an' plumb unpredjudiced, you'll see that it's kinda like my case. Here I'm bein' hazed toward Cheyenne, to be close-penned for life, so your dad says. An' if I lag back a little yuh up an'——"

THE puncher turned toward the front, a little startled, when Yeargen's crisp voice sounded at his elbow. "Seems like yuh've managed to git Ruthie a little bit riled," the old fellow said dryly. "That bein' th' case, an' knowin' 'er as I do, I reckon her an' me better swap places fur a spell. She ain't dangerous none, but when Ruthie decides not to have no doin's with a feller, why she just don't have no doin's with that feller. They's a few dozen young rannies up aroun' Cheyenne that I kin prove that by."

"Any feller up that-a-way that's been havin' better luck?" Red asked brazenly as she shook up the nimble filly and jogged briskly by, her eyes averted, her saucy nose up-tilted.

"Nary one," Yeargen chuckled, seeming to enjoy viewing her evident resentment at the puncher's teasing.

"Then I'm glad I got 'rested," Red raised his voice to say as she drew ahead. When, after reaching the lead position, she shrugged her trim shoulders and brushed down her divided skirt as if after contact with some unclean thing, Red grinned at the marshal and the marshal grinned back at him. Then the puncher raised a clear, untrained tenor in an old trail ditty, the marshal joining in the refrain with an astonishingly deep and powerful basso:

Oh, th' puncher leads th' life
Of a rovin' mav-er-ick.
Rol-l on, lit-tle do-gies.
Pret-ty soon he'll have a wife,
Fur to nurse 'im when he's sick.
Rol-l on, lit-tle do-gies.

THE girl looked back, her oval face aflame, angry tears glinting between her long lashes.

Yeargen jammed the roan against the startled dun and bristled. "Look-ee here, you onregenerate cow-whacker, don't yuh up an' worry that gal no more! If yuh wasn't a helpless prisoner, I'd lick th' hell outa yuh! I'll have yuh to know that I'm 'er dad, an'——"

"I know it," Red cut in coolly. She turned her flaming face away and spurred the unoffending filly with uncalled-for force when he repeated, "Yeh, you're 'er dad. That's th' reason why yuh had luck when yuh started in to 'rest me."

"Umph!" Yeargen grunted, his flaring temper subsiding as suddenly as it had flamed. "Prisoner or no prisoner, stop this monkey-doodle business an' shake that hoss up a little. We wanta hit Antelope afore dark. After supper, we'll have a pow-wow."

"Agreeable with me," Red acquiesced, pricking the dun lightly. "Anyway, with her ahead of me an' you behin' me, I don't 'pear to be chairman of th' c'mitty on 'rangements."

From there on they made good time. But two ranchsteads were passed, and they stopped at each to do small trading. On both occasions the girl did the bartering, while Yeargen guarded the prisoner, rifle at a ready. Dusk was purpling the hills when they jogged down into the beautiful creek. A little off the trail, Yeargen called a halt, and the three proceeded to pitch camp.

The Yeargens were well outfitted and

provided. A small wall tent which Yeargen referred to as "Ruthie's boo-doo-wor" was pitched under the canopy of a spreading cottonwood. The coffeepot soon was bubbling cheerfully on a crackling cedar bough fire. On a fallen log, the girl peeled potatoes and sliced bacon while the men picketed the stock and kept wood and water provided.

Red helped with the camp work, but always under the eye of one of the Yeargens. The rifle and Red's belt lay at the girl's feet while she worked. A gun showed in his shoulder holster when Yeargen removed his long-tailed frock coat. Once, when two cowhands passed on the trail on their way to town, Yeargen picked up the rifle and sat with it on his lap till they had passed from sight.

AFTER thirty minutes, their supper lay spread on a clean blanket by the cottonwood. "Come an' git it," Yeargen called to Red, as the girl was filling their cups with steaming coffee.

"Soon's I wash a little," Red answered, then picked up a towel from his stack of dunnage and ducked his fiery head into a bucket of water, a few feet from the fire. After lathering and squddling noisily, he toweled his ruddy face briskly as he stepped toward the "table" on the opposite side of which Yeargen already had seated himself, cross-legged. The girl returned the coffee pot to the fire and sat down beside her father.

"Better hurry, Cowboy, if yuh wanta git to th' rack 'fore th' fodder's all et," Yeargen smiled. "When I'm hongry, I wait jus' like one hawg waits fur 'nother."

"Don't worry none. I'd soon ketch up, even if yuh did git th' start of me," Red grinned back. With both of them eyeing him, he finished drying his face. As he sat down, he ran the towel around his muscular neck, under the open collar of his shirt. The girl shrank back with a suppressed scream and Yeargen's eyes glinted behind their thick lenses when the puncher's hand came from beneath his shirt holding a heavy, short-barreled six, the frowning blue muzzle of which pointed straight at the marshal's breast.

"Steady, Ol' Timer; don't git enterprisin' ideas," the puncher cautioned, when Yeargen opened his right hand and released the fork he had just picked up. "I was riz to understand that unpleasant things shouldn't be said or did at mealtime. This supper looks plumb lick'em, an' we don't wanta git it all messed up."

"Well, yuh got th' drop," Yeargen confessed, then added defiantly. "I know yuh kin shoot, 'cause I seen yuh do it back there in town. Why don't yuh go 'head an' git it over with?"

" 'Cause I don't wanta," Red answered evenly. "If I had wanted to, I coulda kilt both of yuh 'fore yuh could make a move. I coulda done th' same thing on any rod of road we traveled this afternoon.

"Well, I didn't do it then, an' I ain't doin' it now—which orter convince yuh." He tossed the gun across to Yeargen. "I'll ask yuh fur it an' th' other'n when I think I need 'em. Right now, le's enjoy our supper. When you git through with all this ranny-ki-boo-gus business an' are ready to talk sense, I'll be happy to palaver with yuh."

"What do yuh mean—ranny-ki-boo-gus business?" Yeargen wanted to know, giving the puncher a keen, appraising look.

RED shrugged his muscular shoulders as he slid a sizzling rasher of bacon onto his plate. "Oh everything—all this monkey-doodlin' up there in town an' on th' road. As I told yuh onct before, I ain't kickin' 'cause you 'rested me; but I do hate to be taken fur a dern fool."

"Mind diagrammin' them remarks a little," Yergen set his coffee cup down to ask. "Which way have I been tryin' to make a fool of yuh?"

"Every way," Red accused, stirring condensed milk into his coffee. "First place, I don't look no more like Cheyenne Red than Miss Ruth does like a rhinoceros—

beggin' th' lady's pardon fur th' remark—an' you know it.

"Secont place, you ain't headed fur no railroad, an' ain't gonna——"

"How do you know we ain't gonna hit th' railroad an' ship our stuff—you along with it?" Yeargen asked quickly.

"Huh! That's plumb easy." Red pointed with his fork at the big heap of supplies by the tent. "'Nuff chuck there to last yuh for three-four weeks. People don't cook beans an' bacon on th' cars. Talk like that may do for a chuckle-head like Lannigan, but it shore makes me sore to hand it to me.

"Then take this afternoon. You bought kerosene at that house back there, but I saw yuh pour some outa yur lantern, just before yuh done it. Yuh bought matches at that other ranch—when yuh had a hull bale of 'em in yur own saddle pockets.

"Then, take this here camp. You was careful to chuck it right 'longside th' road where it 'ud be shore to be seen. But yuh ain't unpacked no beddin' as any camper does 'fore dark comes, an' yuh only drove four pegs when yuh put up Miss Ruth's tent.

"Why not come clean, Yeargen? You've amused me a heap, but I'm gittin' my plenty of it." He glanced at the girl, and showed his slow grin. "Yuh know, Miss, your dad's got a kinda cracklin' disposition. Me, I'm a amiable cuss, but I got my limits. If I git peeved a heap an' he gits peeved a heap at th' same time, it may spoil our appetites."

THE girl had been looking from one man to the other, her deep blue eyes wide with amazement. "But, Father," she said, unbelievingly, "is it really true that he is not Cheyenne Red?"

Yeargen shook his shaggy head in negative.

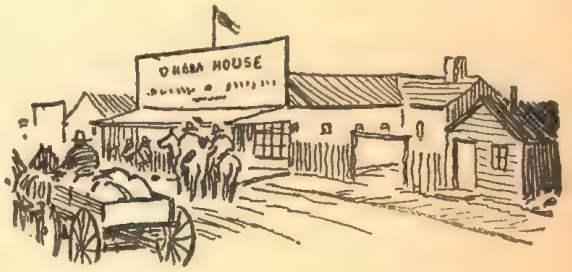
Her face flushed, and she speared a bit of bacon viciously with her fork. "Then why did you——?"

"Wait a minute, Ruthie," requested Yeargen, who still was eyeing the puncher appraisingly. "Le's see if *he* kin tell yuh."

"Huh," Red snorted again. "Must be I look plenty stupid or you wouldn't ast that. But if I hafta do th' tellin' here it comes. Yuh was layin' out in them bad lands watchin' fur these bandits. Yuh hadn't showed yurselfs in town, but yuh run outa grub an' had to come in. Then we got into that ruckus, an' Lannigan was 'bout to pinch yuh. Bein' used to playin' a lone hand, yuh didn't want even th' sheriff to know who yuh was. Yuh knowed that you'd hafta tell 'im if he corralled yuh, an' yuh got mad an'——"

"Uh-huh, but why did I grab *you?*"

"Plumb easy, again. After tellin' who yuh was, yuh wanted everybody to think yuh was leavin' outa here fur th' railroad an' Cheyenne. What yuh really intended to do, when good dark come, was to give me a chanct to make my git-away. Then,



after I'd gone, you'd circle back over west there an' begin all over. That k'rect?"

"Yeh—covers all but one thing. Like yuh say, I 'rested yuh to make 'em think I was done huntin'. I had 'nother reason, though. Yuh see, I didn't know yuh, an'—well, yuh was ridin' east outa there, yuh know, so——" Yeargen hesitated and gave the puncher one of his shrewd, searching looks. "Maybe I'll tell you my other reason fur takin' yuh when yuh tell me *your* reason fur bein' took."

"Fair 'nuff," Red grinned, then laid down his knife and fork and unbuttoned the flap of his shirt pocket. Turning it back, he disclosed a small nickel-plated shield. "Uh-huh. I think yuh guessed it awready. I'm Red Davenport, Deputy United States Marshal fur th' District of

Nebraska. An' yuh see, I didn't know fur shore that you was Yeargen, an' *you* was ridin' east outa there, too." Red looked steadily at the girl, who blushed furiously when he added gallantly, "Not that I was lyin' when I give yuh that other reason why I wanted to git better 'quainted with you folks." Then, out of consideration for her confusion, he grew suddenly serious and turned to the other man. "I'm suggestin' that we team up an' work this out together. Awright?"

"Plumb. Don't mind sayin' that I got a few ideas. I won't tell 'em, though. Wanta see if yuh arrive at th' same conclusion. Fact is, I gotta pretty good idea where their hide-out is. I was so clost on 'em that I actually seen that last job through my field glasses. They was a canyon between me an' them, though, an' they got away 'fore I could come in on 'em."

For the first time Red looked puzzled. "You say *them*. My understandin' is that they've all been one-man jobs."

"In a way, yes. One ranny does th' actual work. But they's anyways two others herds with 'im. It's a gang."

"You got any hunch?"

"Just got in here, yesterday mornin'," Red evaded. "You're th' captain, an' I'm a private. What I need now is orders."

"Comin' right up. First, finish your supper—an' eat a plenty, whilst you're 'bout it. We don't do no cookin' after tonight. Next order'll be to break camp an' make a sneak aroun' town an' back where me'n' Ruthie's been layin' out. An' lissen, Cowboy. If action is what you're cravin', I'm predictin' that you'll git a bellyful of it, within forty-eight hours—maybe sooner."

Chapter III

ACTION!

DAWN stole over the ill-famed bad lands. Lying in a little depression on the summit of a gigantic brown boulder, Red Davenport watched rock after rock thrust its rugged head out of the receding mists as the eastern sky changed from dull gray to pale orange, then to chrome yellow shot with shell pink and old rose.

Behind Red lay the snug little basin in which they had made a fireless camp at a similar hour on the previous morning. It was a semi-verdant little oasis in a jumble of boulders and dry washes. There was an acre or so of sparse bunchgrass, and a natural basin in which a scant supply of tepid water stood. Surrounding the forbidding spot, a palisade of crumbling brown boulders fenced it off from the world, except for the narrow and difficult passage Yeargen had chanced to discover when prowling about the place weeks previously. Outside that little bowl, the section was a flat of barren rock, veined by small canyons and dry washes—a region in which one man could easily elude a regiment or ambush a squad successfully.

Finishing the cold bacon sandwich upon which he had been munching when he took up the first watch of the day, Red fashioned a cigarette and lighted it, listening to the subdued sounds from the camp below. He heard Yeargen's high heels click-clock to the rocky tank and back, and a light tinkle of the girl's laughter at something her father had said. Sweet music, Red thought.

A CRESCENT of red-amber flame appeared on the eastern horizon, transforming the plain beyond the rocks into a brassy sheet. Red watched it for a time idly, then stiffened suddenly and rose slowly to his feet, instinctively gripping his rifle and raising it to a ready. Every muscle in his supple body braced, he stood for a time as a pointer dog stands—rigid as the very rocks about him.

For, a little black dot had appeared full in the glowing path of the rising sun, then another and another. Backgrounded by that fiery orb that now had grown from a thin crescent to a half-disk, they stood out distinctly, though so distant that he could

tell nothing about them except that they were moving toward him. Minutes later, as the brassy sun commenced to swing clear of the horizon, they faded slowly, even as they enlarged. After a time, they disappeared entirely, but in their stead appeared a low-lying dun dustcloud that crawled steadily toward the bad lands. In another quarter of an hour, the dustcloud had approached so near that in it three riders could be discerned. Red could even see that the leader rode a white horse. As he watched, they swerved a little to southward, then held directly westward, slowing their rapid pace as the footing became rougher.

Red placed his forefingers to his lips and emitted a shrill whistle that brought Yeargen scrambling up the boulder with the agility of a mountain goat. "What yuh got, son? Anything real——

"Oh, I see. Great snakes an' horned toads, Cowboy! My hunch is that this is our big day! They're bearin' straight for that deep wash that I seen 'em prowlin' aroun' just afore that rob'ry t'other day! Shore as shootin' is shootin' they've come after that money!"

Yeargen's slim hands trembled with eagerness as he took a pair of field glasses from their leather case at his hip and attempted to bring the distant riders into focus. He swore luridly when they dipped into the head of the wash out of sight.

"Too bad, but it can't be helped," Red remarked philosophically. "If yuh'd ketched sight of 'em, yuh might knowed 'em when yuh seen 'em again. Next best thing I know to do is to ease over there an' try to locate 'em. It's a big contract, but we kin try."

"K'rect," Yeargen agreed. He stood for a time with his chin in his hand, his lean face thoughtful. "Best chanct I know is fur us to split," he announced finally. "I'll take my hoss an' fan it in a wide circle till I'm due south of 'em, then work in from that d'rection. You hit straight south frum here an' see what yuh kin see. Yuh'll hafta go afoot—no washes runnin' that-a-way, for a hoss to foller.

"If either of us gets into a ruckus, th' play is to lay tight an' burn plenty powder till th' other'n' comes. Don't say nothin' 'bout this to Ruthie, though. If she finds it out, she'll go 'long in spite of hell an' high water.

"C'mon. When we git down there, just ease off 'thout lettin' 'er see yuh go, whilst I out-talk 'er an' git my hoss."

THE girl was washing one of her father's flannel shirts in a tin basin set on a small rock by the tent. With her white arms bare to the elbows and her aurora of copper-glinted hair hanging in untrained festoons about her trim shoulders, she proved so eye-filling that Red could not forbear stopping for a word with her, eager as he was to be out and away. "Hard work for pretty hands," he said gallantly, as she smiled a greeting.

"The washing is not so very hard, we have so little clothing with us," she answered, taking her hands out of the water to wipe a splash of suds off her pert nose with a corner of her bibbed apron. She cast him a side-glance as she added, "The *wringing* is a little difficult, though. Men's clothes are *so* heavy."

Red almost bit his lip in two from exasperation. She was hinting for him to stay and help, and he had to pass it up! What a lazy duffer she'd think him! "Pretty mornin'," was all he could think of to say as he strolled away from the spot with elaborate casualness. As he picked up speed after getting out of her sight, he heard Yeargen telling her that he thought he'd "git out his hoss an' go fur a little look-see!"

"Hell!" the big puncher mused as he started south at a jog after emerging from the entrance by the big boulder. "A few minutes ago I was afraid them rannies over there might git me if I run onto 'em unexpected; now I'm half afeared they won't. If I ever git myself into 'nother

jam like that with her, I'll just up an' shoot myself an' let it go at that."

THOUGH the chances had been against him, Red struck scent, almost at once. Going southward, he was forced to cross ridge after ridge, but none of them was high, and he was wearing moccasins instead of his boots. He had proceeded for perhaps half a mile, when a moving object caught his eye as he topped a ridge. Stopping, he made out that it was the peak of a high-crowned hat, the wearer of which was riding westward in a wash. Wondering whether the three had separated or if this man could be located because either he or his horse or his hat was taller than the others, Red changed his course to parallel the other's and jogged westward along the ridge, keeping his eyes on that bobbing hat. He had run more than a quarter of a mile and had commenced to sweat freely, when he discovered that the corrugation he was following was curving to meet the other, and that the wash the rider was traveling had deepened until the hat could be seen only occasionally. A minute later, he came to a shallow, steep-walled channel that ran crosswise of his course. Dropping into it, he ran southward over its smooth bed for a hundred yards, jerking to a stop when he heard the unmistakable clicking of shod hooves on rock, close at hand.

Then, suddenly, as he stood listening, the hoofbeats stilled, and a low murmur of voices was heard. Red started on, keeping his lithe body tucked tightly against the rocky wall and stepping cautiously, rifle at a ready. As he advanced, the voices sounded louder, and occasionally a word could be distinguished. Knowing that he must be close in on them, he scrambled out of the drain and crept along its rim.

A hundred yards, and a man's coarse laughter sounded below and to his right. Another hundred and he was looking down on three men who were huddled in a little hollow where the drains crossed, busily engaged in taking great wads of money from a sack and dividing it into three piles.

TWO of the men were facing Red. One of them was a gangling, black-bearded fellow with an enormous Adam's apple and a high, thin voice. The second was shorter and his thin hair was tinged with gray. The third, who appeared to be the leader, sat with his back to Red, superintending the counting.

What to do? Yeargen would enter the washes from the south, and might or might not come that far north. If he did come that far, there was only a slim chance that he would follow that particular drain. Red had plenty of fight in him, but if he tackled that gang alone, he must try to take all the best of it. He was debating his best course, when he became aware that the three in the drain had fallen into sudden confusion. Two of them grabbed the money and commenced stuffing it hurriedly back into the bag. The third, the heavy-bodied fellow with his back toward Red, caught up his rifle and ran south for a little way, then threw himself behind a little boulder and peered out over it. Just then Red's ears caught the sound of a galloping horse, coming up the drain.

Seconds later, the rider came into sight, and Red's heart appeared to skip a beat, then race madly. It was Yeargen, hunched over the horn, his eyes searching the floor of the drain for the sign he evidently had crossed and was trying to follow. Even as he saw Yeargen, out of the tail of his eye Red saw the bandit poke his rifle over the little boulder and tuck his cheek against the stock.

Action! Jumping to his feet, Red swung his rifle around and fired from the hip, just as the prostrate bandit's shoulder hunched when he drew trigger. There were twin reports, then Red gathered himself and leaped to close quarters. While in mid-air, he saw Yeargen's horse pinwheel forward, dumping his rider as a laborer overturns a wheelbarrow. Then

Red found himself within yards of two surprised bandits, while the third whirled his way and raised his rifle again. Steadying his aim this time, Red threw a slug at him, then spun to face the others.

THE tall, bearded fellow had crouched and drawn, but he fell with a scream of pain when the puncher's bullet tore through his chest. Red felt a searing pain shoot through the muscle of his right shoulder as he faced the other, but grated his even teeth and braced himself. Yeargen was down. That girl would be alone! He *had* to get them!

He sought to raise the rifle again, but his right arm simply wouldn't work. He dropped the rifle and snatched out his six with his left hand. It seemed to him that a hail of bullets was ripping through his chest, his abdomen—even his skull. But in the haze of pain and confusion of mind that gripped him he saw a crouching figure, with gun extended. Mechanically he triggered the six at it—how many times, he did not know. The first thing that he did know was that the shooting had stopped and he was sitting with his back braced against the rocky wall, while something that was at once stinging and bracing was trickling down his throat. Then came Yeargen's voice, as though from a great distance, "Come outa it, son! Ketch holt of yourself, you fightin' son-of-a-gun!"

Red did come out of it to find that he had a slashed shoulder muscle, a gashed scalp and a punctured thigh—but a framework that was intact. "Is it Pringle?" he asked, pointing weakly to where the bandit with the rifle lay sprawled on the white rock.

"Shore it's Pringle," Yeargen chortled. "Suspected 'im frum th' start, 'cause it 'peared he always was out this way when anything happened. Made 'im think I was comin' back later to hunt for th' swag, so he'd try to beat me to it, an' show 'is hand. It worked, son. But if you hadn't fit like a sack of intoxicated bobcats whilst my dead hoss had me pinned down, we'd 'a' been bogged proper.

"Here! Take another little snifter, then let's see can we walk."

Three hours later Red lay on a cot in the tent, bathed and bandaged by Yeargen's not unskillful hands. Two soft palms rearranged his pillow for the hundredth time, and a pair of deep blue eyes looked compassionately down at him from below a glory of coppery hair. "Oh I *do* wish father would hurry and bring the sheriff and the doctor," she said nervously.

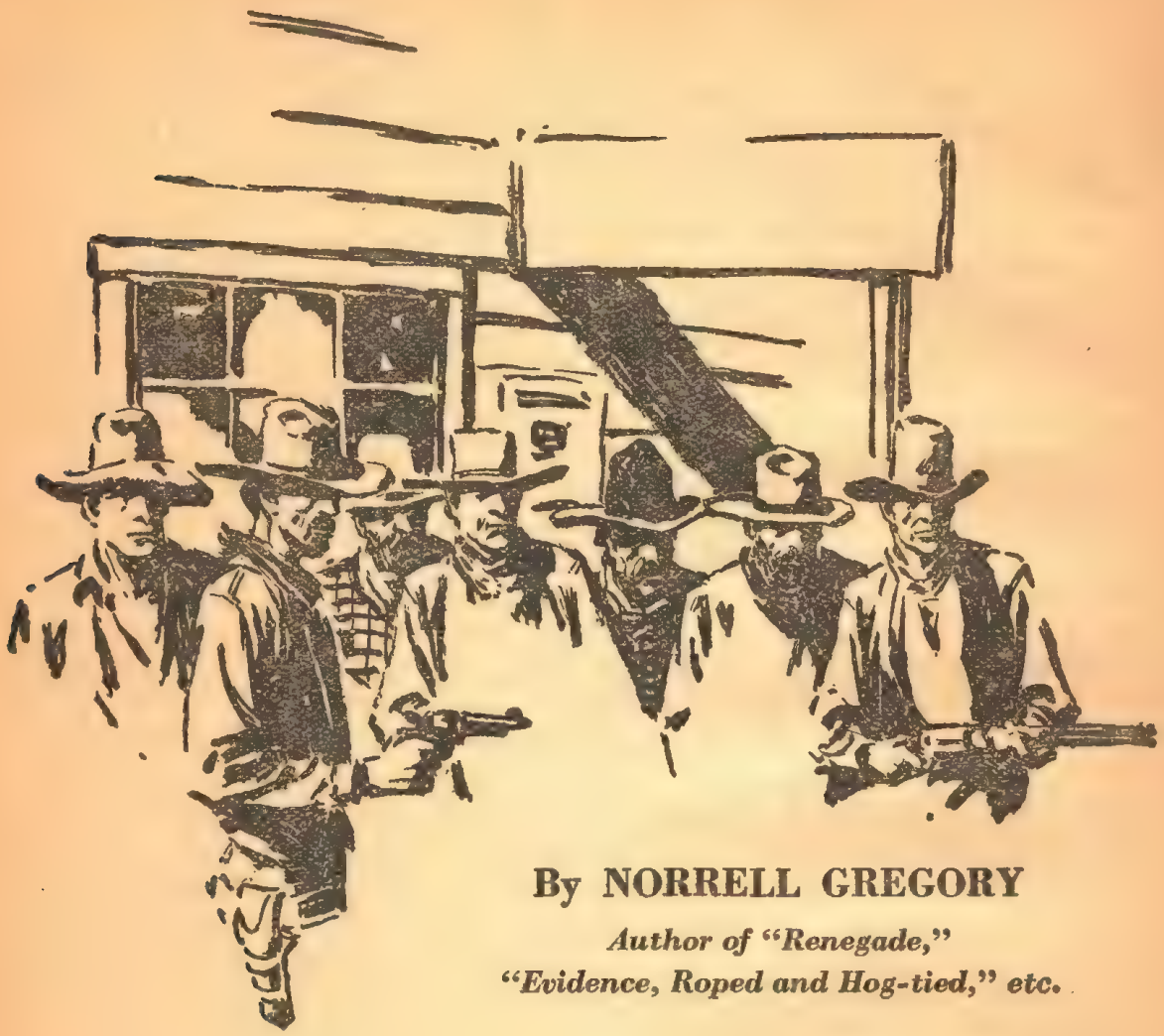
Red caught her hands and pulled them gently downward till they encircled his sunburned neck. "If you're a mental telepathist, send dad word that he needn't hurry," he chuckled blissfully when her weak pretense of resistance ceased. "Anyway, if he does fetch a sheriff an' a doctor, I'm gonna make 'im take 'em right back an' swap 'em fur a preacher or a judge. Right?"

"Right."

"Bully girl, come an' git it!"

"Coming. And, oh, Red, you don't know how *hungry* I am."

The Rock of the Raiding



By NORRELL GREGORY

Author of "Renegade," "Evidence, Roped and Hog-tied," etc.

TALL and straight and powerful, Rock Raiding stood in the doorway of the ranch cabin and stared north where the west fork of the Raiding River broke through the gorge to join the main stem.

"Haave," he said without turning, "ain't that Barney Baroosh headin' this way?"

Twenty-year-old Haven Raiding came and stood beside his father with a six-shooter in one hand and a little cleaning rod in the other. The two looked so wonderfully alike that many a stranger mistook them for brothers, for big Rock, at forty, had not a thread of silver in his black hair nor a wrinkle in his face.

"It's Baroosh, all right," said Haven, then went back and resumed the cleaning of his gun.

Barney Baroosh stopped his horse before the door and talked from the saddle.

"How much for this ranch, Raiding?" he said.

"This ranch ain't for sale," said Rock flatly.

"It's *got* to be for sale!" said Barney

The Raidings Were a Fighting Family—and Had Plenty Chance to Show It

Baroosh, sitting with his heavy shoulders hunched over the saddle horn, glaring at Rock through his heavy lidded eyes. "I've got to have it, Raiding!"

Rock Raiding stiffened and threw down on Baroosh a rigid forefinger, much after the manner of a man throwing a six-shooter.

"Baroosh, it's time you got called. I'm callin' you! You've got the East Fork and you've got the main stem, but by the hinges of hell you'll never git this fork! Not while I live and breathe, Baroosh!"

Baroosh sat and glared at Rock with his teeth gleaming through his whiskers.

"Big talk, Raiding!" he snarled. "Big talk. I'm comin' in!"

"Then come a-shootin'!" Rock warned him.

Barney Baroosh turned his horse and rode back. Rock watched him until he had melted into the gorge, then he turned to his son.

"What are you cleanin' up the old six-shooter for, Haave?"

YOUNG HAVEN broke the gun and squinted through the flawless bore.

"Well," he said, "I've heard Matt Gunner was lookin' for me. I'm goin' over to town today and I figured I might run into him."

"Haave," said his father bluntly, "are you goin' to town on a chance of seein' Matt Gunner or on a chance of seein' Harry Grace's girl?"

Haven reddened. "Both, I reckon, Pappy," he said candidly.

"Let's git our house in order," said Rock bluntly. "You heard what Baroosh said. He's got the East Fork and the main stem, and he's drove out every rancher that used to hold there. Now he's after this fork, and if he gits a hold it means we'll have to clear out, along with every other rancher in here. You know how that devil fights—no holds barred. We can't give him a chance to foul us, Haave. Stay clear of rustlers and rustlers' daughters!"

Haven's fine dark face darkened. Into his dark eyes leaped a flash of fire.

"I know Harry Grace is called a rustler!" he said bitterly. "But Barney Baroosh made him a rustler. Harry Grace never rustled a head of stock but what was comin' to him——"

"That's what most rustlers plead——"

BUT Haven cut him off. "Let me finish. This is the part that's not generally known. When Harry Grace was foreman for Barney Baroosh, Baroosh promised to set him up in the cattle business if he would stay with him five years. Harry stayed. But when settlin' day come, Baroosh told Harry he'd have to marry his girl. Harry didn't want her, so Baroosh kicked him out, and never paid him a cent. You know the rest. Harry has took just what was comin' to him. He never stole a head of——"

"It was stealin' just the same!" said Rock inflexibly. "But I ain't condemnin' Harry Grace. I'm warnin' you. Baroosh is out to git him and he'll git him in the end. You stay in the clear, son. And let Matt Gunner at least make a face at you before you make a pass at him."

Young Haven grinned, buckled on the six-shooter, caught a horse out of the corral and rode off towards Raiding City. Rock saddled another horse and rode back on the south slope to mend some fence broken by the winter snows. It was noon when he came back to the house and just as he stepped off and threw the stirrup over the saddle to get at the cinch hook a man came through the gorge, riding as if the devil himself was on his tail.

Rock stayed his hands. Saw that the rider was Jess Kinder, a rancher above him. Jess never took in his horse until he was almost on top of rock, then he reined in with such violence that the horse sat down on his haunches, slid a way and pawed at the air.

"What's up, Jess?" cried Rock.

"Your boy walked into Limpy Tail's place and shot Matt Gunner as dead as a

mackerel!" shouted Jess. "Never give him a word of warnin', and Gunner didn't have no gun!"

"Did they arrest him?"

"Not yet!" Jess was highly excited. "He got away with the sheriff shootin' at him. Come this way and turned up the other fork past Harry Grace's place. I'm one of the posse. I bore off to tell you, Rock. That posse means to shoot him down on sight."

"Wait till I get my gun!" Rock turned towards the house, running. He came back, running as he buckled it about his waist, swung into the saddle and spurred fiercely.

"Something off, Jess! That boy never shot an unarmed man! It's a frame——"

"I seen it. He shot Gunner, and Gunner never had a gun. The sheriff hit him as he rode out of town. Hit him hard. I thought he'd fall, but he stuck to the saddle. There was blood signs."

AT THE confluence of the two forks they crossed the river. There was Harry Grace's place. On the opposite side of the river a horseman was just disappearing into the brush.

"Sheriff probaly sent one man that way in case Haave swings back. The rest went straight on west," Jess pointed. "That's the way his horse tracks pointed."

Rock clenched his teeth until his jaws ached and rode west. They topped a divide. Ahead the trail crossed a flat mesa. A cloud of dust, not yet settled, marked the course of the flying posse. Rock spurred his horse savagely. Jess Kinder kept pace. Threw a look at Rock's set face, and voiced Rock's very thoughts.

"They'll nail him on the down grade. Haave was hit too hard to ride hard down that grade. The jar will bleed him white."

Rock's only answer was to spur his horse again. The poor beast was already doing his best. They swept across the mesa and plunged over the rim. Far below, a group of horsemen were clustered about a central object. Rock reined in and groaned aloud.

"They've got him! They're turnin' back! Rock, I seen that shootin', but I'll go to hell with the dampers open before I'll swear a word against that boy. Matt Gunner may not have wore any gun but he's been needin' killin' a long, long time."

But Rock was staring at the approaching group of riders.

"Look, Jess!" he exclaimed. "That's Haave's horse, but it ain't Haave ridin' him!"

Jess looked and suddenly let out an oath of amazed surprise. "It's Harry Grace's girl. Ridin' Haave's horse and wearin' a man's hat!"

He continued to stare, open mouthed, until the full realization of what had happened dawned upon him. Then he struck the pommel of his saddle and let out a whoop.

"See what happened, Rock? Haave simply laid in at Harry Grace's place while the girl took his hoss and led the posse

a wild-goose chase. After the posse had passed Haave jist turned around and rode the other way. Remember that rider we seen across the river? Well, I'm bettin' that was Haave."

Rock realized that Jess must have guessed aright. He was aware of a mighty sense of relief. Haave, now, was probably far up in the Rustler Mountains. The posse would never get him now. At least there'd be time to get to the bottom of the shooting.

The posse came charging up the slope. Katie Grace, riding Haave's horse superbly, in the center. Rock saw that her color

was high and her eyes flashing. Spirit in that girl, plenty of it. On more than one of the possemen's faces Rock saw reluctant admiration. But Sheriff DeMott's heavy jowled face was suffused with mortified rage. The sheriff was a Baroosh man, as were most of his posse. Rock knew that if that bunch had come up on Haave that he would have been shot down like a dog.

The posse stopped.

"Sheriff," said Rock, "you're improvin'. At least you have caught somebody. That's damn near a record for you, ain't it?"

There was a guffaw or two from the possemen. The sheriff whirled first toward the offending members, then back on Rock.

"Laugh, Raiding!" he snarled. "Laugh while you may. But you won't be laughin' when I bring that young hellion in over a saddle, head and feet down. You won't laugh then, Raiding!"

"I'm not laughin' now, Sheriff," said Rock steadily. "But you murder that boy and it'll be the last crime you'll ever commit. And that ain't a threat—it's a promise!"

The two's eyes clashed for a moment. But it was the sheriff's that fell first.

"What do you aim to do with that girl?" Rock continued.

"Jail her——" began the sheriff furiously, then stopped. Realized that it might be unwise to commit himself.

"I say turn her loose—she ain't done nothin'," said one of the posse.

"Except make a damn fool out of us!" chuckled another.

"Shut up!" roared the sheriff. He glared first at his posse, then at Katie Grace.

"You jail that girl, Sheriff," said Rock, "and you'll never win another election—not even with Barney Baroosh backin' you. Ain't that right, men?"

The sheriff realized it. He swung his arm in a violent half circle. "Come on, men!" he barked. "We got to pick up that hellion's trail before dark. He must have headed south from the forks."

The posse swept on, Jess Kinder with them. Rock turned and rode slowly back with Katie Grace.

"Girl," he said softly, "you took a fearful chance! That outfit was all keyed to shoot at sight—ordered to. They could easy have claimed they thought it was Haave. That's his hat, ain't it?"

She nodded. "They're awful poor shots!" she said.

Rock stared at her. Looking closer he could see a hole in the brim of the hat that had not been there when Haave left home. Pure grit, through and through, that girl.

"Did Haave say where he was headed?"

SHE shook her head, pulled the reins nervously back and forth through her hands. Looking at her, Rock realized for the first time how wonderfully like her mother she looked. Twenty years ago all the boys were fighting over pretty Molly O'Day. But only Harry Grace had won her. Harry Grace, the rustler, when she might have had the cream of the country!

At the Grace ranch the girl dismounted and handed the reins to Rock.

"Do you mind if I keep the hat?" she asked softly. "I might never——"

Rock blew his nose tremendously.

"Katie, girl," he said, addressing her by her name for the first time, "anything that I got, or anything that Haave's got, is yours—for the askin'."

He rode on then, leading Haave's horse. At his own corral he unsaddled the animal. Saw that the horn and one side of the bulge was covered with dried blood. The right stirrup was also blood stained. Rock's face was set and stony as he cleansed the leather and wood.

Jess Kinder rode past just at dark.

"We trailed his horse way back of Rustler peak," he said. "Never got close. Guess Haave must have got his hurts tied up 'cause we didn't find any more blood, and his horse covered some ground that nobody but a man in purty good shape could have rode over. There'll be a watch

set on your place here tonight, Rock."

"Haave's not that big a fool," said Rock, but after Jess had ridden on he tore a sheet into strips and got out a bottle of carbolic acid and a box of salve. The boy had been hit hard. The saddle showed that. Right now he might be lying up in the rocks, consumed with thirst and burning with gunshot fever. All night long Rock paced the floor, his entire being keyed to the keenest expectancy.

Next day it was hard for Rock to stay close to the ranch house, but he forced himself to do it. Knew it was his best course. Jess Kinder came past again at sundown and announced that they had lost the trail completely, but had found the riderless horse, way back of Rustler Peak.

"We've combed ever crack in there," said Jess. "He ain't there. Tomorrow we're working the mountains west. But don't you worry about *me* ever findin' a trace of him, Rock. If all that posse is as blind as I am he'll never be found."

So Haave was afoot. That meant but one thing to Rock. The boy wasn't able to keep the saddle. He'd never desert a horse otherwise—never. That night he made a compact bundle of some grub, bandages and medicine. He left the ranch before daylight, afoot, because he could travel with less chance of being spotted, and he was way back in the Rustler mountains by daylight. All day long he threaded those fearful mazes, but he discovered no signs of humans except the signs the posse had left behind them.

He came back home at dark, exhausted and discouraged. And that night he slept. He would have slept with a loaded gun at his head. Tough as he was he couldn't draw on his reserves forever.

JESS KINDER rode past the next morning. Shook his head at the question in Rock's eyes.

"Nary a hide nor hair of him. It's jist like that boy sprouted wings and flew away. But did you hear what happened last night?"

"What?" said Rock.

"Why a big bunch of stock was run off. Some of Baroosh's, but more of other ranchers'. Harry Grace knowed we was all wore out huntin' Haave, so he jist took advantage of it. But damn it Rock, that's goin' too fur. Long as he jist steals from Baroosh, don't matter. Baroosh is rich. But when he takes to stealin' from th' rest of us pore devils why it's time somethin' was done."

Ordinarily Rock would have agreed with him heartily. But now with his only boy a fugitive, made so, he was mortally certain, by the forces of the law controlled by Barney Baroosh, and with the picture of pretty Katie Grace riding the gamut of the possemen's bullets, to give Haave a chance——

"How do you know it was Harry Grace that run them off?" he asked sharply.

Jess looked surprised. "Why, Rock, I heard you say, many a time that Harry would end up at the end of a rope. Who else has been rustlin' cattle in these parts? Anyway, I figure somethin' will be done about it—pronto."

He spurred his horse then, and rode on. Rock saddled his own horse and headed for town. There was more back of Jess Kinder's statement than showed on the surface.

In town he found a surprising number of people, for a mid-week day. They were gathered in clumps all over town, talking. But whenever he came onto such a group, the talk stopped at once, and he noticed men eyeing him askance. Barney Baroosh was there, so was his weasel-eyed foreman, Abe Liskey, and his bull-necked son-in-law, Crag Petroff.

Rock knew something was a-brew. But he couldn't learn a thing; people simply wouldn't talk to him. They avoided him. But he caught Jess Kinder at the barn, just as he was about to go home. Even Jess tired to evade him, but Rock caught him by the arm and hauled him out back where they were hidden by a high, board corral fence.

"Jess," he said sternly, "there's somethin' goin' on. I want to know what it is."

Jess twisted and squirmed.

"How would *I* know, Rock?"

"You do know. Everybody knows but me. Come clean, Jess. I've always counted you as a friend."

Jess hesitated. "Rock," he said, "I'll tell you. But don't ever breathe where you got it. There's a meetin' called at the schoolhouse tonight. They aim to lynch Harry Grace."

"Why wasn't I invited?"

"You know. They figure you're too close to Grace. Or that Haave was."

"Did you ever wonder why Baroosh never had Harry Grace arrested and tried for rustlin', Jess?"

"No. Why?" Jess's eyes came to instant focus.

"I'll tell you—and the rest of them tonight, at the meetin'," said Rock.

Jess caught his arm wildly. "Rock, stay away from that meetin'! You can't do Harry no good. And if it gits out that I tipped you off, Baroosh will have my hide. He's got a twist——"

"Barney Baroosh has got a twist on too many men in this section," said Rock weightily. "After what Harry's girl done for Haave I'd be a dog if I didn't at least stand up and tell what I know. But don't worry none about me exposin' you, Jess."

Jess caught his arm as he would have turned back into the barn.

"Rock, there's an agreement not to bring any shootin' arms. That's on the level, Rock. That's straight."

"Straight as Barney Baroosh's crooked black soul!" said Rock bitterly. "Believe as much of it as you can, Jess, but don't strain yourself."

IT WAS nearly dark when Rock reached the ranch. He did the necessary chores and ate a cold cheerless supper. It was dark then. He took down his six-shooter, started to put it on. Then he hung it back on its accustomed peg, saddled a fresh horse and set out.

Light was streaming from the windows of the little log schoolhouse when he rode up. There were a number of horses tied to the hitch rack, and even in the darkness Rock could recognize many of them. There were horses there that he never had expected to find at such a gathering.

Rock didn't dismount at once. He reined his horse back into a clump of servis brush and waited. Two men rode up, dismounted, knocked at the door in a peculiar manner, and were admitted. Rock then dismounted, and knocked after the same manner. The door was opened and he started in.

"Keep that man out!" roared a voice—Barney Baroosh's voice.

The startled doorkeeper attempted to close the door on Rock. With a single sweep of his arm Rock sent him sprawling. Then in he came, and marched straight to the front.

There on the little platform where the school mistress was wont to preside during school hours, stood squat Barney Baroosh, his eyes gleaming through the great shock of whiskers that grew almost around them. On his right stood Crag Petroff, his son-in-law, bull-necked and beefy; on his right stood black-eyed Abe Liskey, foreman, lean and wolfish.

"Before there's a vote taken to have me throwed out I want to say my little piece, Baroosh," said Rock directly. "And I *will* say it. There's a few honest men here that needs talkin' to."

Abe Liskey slid his right hand under his armpit and looked at Barney Baroosh inquiringly. Barney Baroosh stared straight at Rock.

"Make it short, Raiding!" he growled.

"I want you to tell these men why you never had Harry Grace arrested for rustlin', Baroosh."

"By God," raged Baroosh, "have you the gall to stand with rustlers and thieves, Raiding?"

"I stand for the right!" said Rock sturdily. "You won't tell? Then I will. Men, he don't dare take it to a court of appeal

because he knows he promised Harry Grace, when Harry was his foreman that he'd set him up in the cattle business, and when Harry refused to marry his girl, he kicked him out, without payin' him a cent. Men, I don't believe Harry Grace ever rustled a head of stock but what was rightfully comin' to him."

"What about the other ranchers that have lost cattle?" shouted Crag Petroff. "Plenty of them, right here now, have lost cattle. What become of them, Raiding?"

ONE long stride brought Rock close to Petroff. With his eyes he fixed the man.

"Are you shore you want me to tell this crowd where them cattle went to, Petroff?"

Petroff's lips went bloodless. He glanced across at Abe Liskey. Liskey's eyes blazed into Rock's.

"We'll call your bluff, Raiding. Tell what you think you know!"

"Men," said Rock, half facing the crowd,

"if you'd stop to think a minute you'd know it was plumb impossible for Harry Grace to have rustled all the cattle accredited to him, *without help*. Now I'll tell you where your cattle went—most of them. This hound here," he leveled an accusing finger at Crag Petroff, "and that damned——"

Like a striking rattler's head, Abe Liskey's hand darted under his armpit. But swift as he was, Rock was swifter. His clenched fist, traveling upward caught Liskey below the chin and Liskey was lifted straight up, his neck stretching unbelievedly, his popping eyes glazing before he struck the floor where a gun clattered from his hand as he fell.

Scornfully Rock kicked the gun out in plain view. Pointed to a suspicious appearing bulge on Petroff's hip.

"Why didn't you draw too, Petroff?" he asked disdainfully.

There was an instant uproar in the room. A big yellow haired Swede rancher jumped up on a seat and waved his hands and shouted them all down.

"By Yimminy, I don't lik it!" he shouted. "By Yimminy, I ban goin' home!"

Then he jumped off the desk and started for the door. Seven men followed him. Seven stayed. Outside, they mounted without a word and rode off like men ashamed of themselves. Seven honest but misled men.

BACK in the loneliness of the cabin Rock looked into the little room where Haave always slept. It seemed that he must see Haave's long form stretched there now, sleeping with his head on his arm, as Haave always slept. But the bunk was smooth and flat; Haave wasn't there.

Next day Rock spent in another fruitless search of the Rustler mountains. He knew it was hopeless, but he couldn't keep from trying. Three days without food or water would finish a well man. At sundown he came back home to find Jess Kinder sitting on his doorstep, holding his horse's reins in his hand.

"Rock," said Jess nervously, pulling the reins through his hands, "I heard something today."

"What?" said Rock, stock still.

"I heard Haave is holed up over in the Black Butte country, twenty miles north of town."

"Is that straight, Jess?" Rock's form straightened with a leap. "Where did it come from, Jess?"

"I—I can't tell you where it come from, but it's straight Rock. Plumb straight."

"I shore appreciate this, Jess!" said Rock. "You'll never lose by it."

"Don't mention it," said Jess, mounted and rode off hurriedly.

Rock took his horse down to the corral and caught a fresh one. He saddled him and tied him to the fence. Then he went to the house and made up a package of fresh food and bandages, and the medicine. He caught himself whistling under his breath. He waited until dark before he started. There might be still a watch kept on his place.

He entered town at the hour when most town people were at supper, and before the younger ranch element began to come in for their revelry. The only place of business that was lighted was Limpy Tail's place, and Limpy Tail with a soiled white apron bound about his ample middle was standing in the doorway staring out into the street. He saw and recognized Rock, and motioned frantically for him to turn in.

Rock turned his horse and rode close to the door.

"Where you headed, Rock?" Limpy looked up at Rock with his shrewd, fat-padded eyes. Over six feet tall, Limpy, and enormously fat. His left leg was shorter, by two inches, than his right, but for all his bulk and lameness, Limpy Tail was fast on his feet, and powerful as a bull.

Rock stared hard into his eyes.

"Limpy," he said, "I come to town the other day for information. You wouldn't put out anything. I'll make a bargain with you. Tell me the straight of that shootin' and I'll tell you where I'm headed."

"Are they connected?"

"They are."

"Come inside," said Limpy, and led the way with his undulating gait. Went clear back to the little den behind the bar before he said a word.

"You knowed Haave had had trouble with Matt Gunner?"

ROCK nodded. "I knowed Gunner needed killin'. But I'll never believe, till Haave tells me with his own mouth, that he shot an unarmed man, without warning."

"Well, he did," said Limpy flatly. "And here's how:

"Gunner was in here that day, drinkin'. About noon Abe Liskey come in. 'Matt,' he said, 'Haave Raiding is lookin' for you. Swears he aims to kill you soon as he sees you. Gimme that gun, Matt. Even Haave wouldn't shoot an unarmed man.'

"So Gunner handed his gun over. He was scared green. I went to the winder and I seen Petroff talkin' to your boy across the street. Then some customers come in, and I had to go and git 'em some drinks. While I was doin' that, Haave come in. He stopped jist inside the door and he seen Gunner. Gunner seen him too, and kinda throwed up his arm. Haave killed him in his tracks.

" 'You've killed an unarmed man!' yelled Abe Liskey.

"Haave didn't say anything, just come right up and felt over Gunner. When he straightened up he looked mighty sick.

" 'Limpy,' he says to me, 'I've been crooked. Petroff told me Gunner was waitin' in here to kill me the minute I stepped inside the door. Said he wouldn't be wearin' any hip gun, but that he had a shoulder gun. Petroff told a lie, Limpy. What should I do?'

" 'Take it on the run,' I told him, and he did. That's the how of it, Rock, and I'll swear to it. I didn't tell you when you was in here yesterday, 'cause I knowed if I did there'd be more dead men scattered about. Now tell me where you're headed."

"I'm headed to see Haave," said Rock, wiping cold sweat from his forehead. "He's holed up over in the Black Butte country."

Big Limpy started. "Who'n hell told you that story, Rock?"

"It come straight. Jess Kinder told me."

LIMPY beat the air with his massive fists, and swore horribly.

"I feared it. They've got Jess roped too. Rock, Jess told you a damn lie."

"I don't believe Jess would do that," said Rock. "What makes you think he lied?"

"Because Baroosh, at least Petroff and Liskey, are takin' a bunch out to Harry Grace's place tonight, to hang him. Jess Kinder knows it. He may be in on it, for all I know, but I know he knows it. He's been told to tell you Haave was way over there just to git you out of the way. They're afeared of you, Rock; they think you might fight for Harry Grace."

"I will!" said Rock fiercely. "I'd be a dog if I didn't, knowin' what I know, and after what his girl done for Haave."

"You don't know the half of it," said Limpy. "I *know*. Harry Grace has always been straight with me. He told me over a month ago that he figured he was square with Baroosh. He never had a thing to do with this last bunch that was rustled."

"Did he tell you that, Limpy?"

"With his own mouth. And I never caught Harry Grace in a lie yit. Petroff and Abe Liskey rustled them stock, and blamed it on Harry. They've been rustlin' old Barney Baroosh blind, and he's thought it was Harry Grace. Hell, Harry Grace never took a tenth of the cattle Baroosh's lost."

"How do you know all this, Limpy?"

"Why, Harry told me. He had to make a deal with Liskey and Petroff, to git what was comin' to him. Now he's got it and through, they're afeared he'll squeal on 'em. See? Rock, you got to git out there and git him word. I aimed to go myself, but I'd bog down any horse and have to walk back. You got to go, Rock."

"But how about Jess?" began Rock.

"Jess Kinder has had twice as many cattle as they blame on Harry Grace. You'll have to take my word for that, Rock. I've kinda been on the inside, with Harry. Git goin' man! They'll be there early. You broke up the meetin' last night, but you'll never do it tonight. They've got a bunch of paid killers along. Hell, Rock, Petroff and Liskey are spreadin' it that it's been *you* and your boy that been helpin' Harry rustle."

Rock settled his gun belt.

"Tonight," he said, "if they come to lynch Harry Grace I'll answer that with something a damn sight harder than words. You're a white man, Limpy. If you ever get any word of Haave's whereabouts you'll get me word, won't you?"

"If I have to wade through the cinders of hell barefoot, I'll do it!" swore Limpy, and fairly pushed Rock out of the place.

Rock rode hard. He knew he had to get there ahead of the raiders. Harry Grace's place was dark and silent when he rode up, but a dog barked vociferously. Rock stepped off and rapped on the door.

"Who's there?" It was Harry Grace's voice, sharp and suspicious.

"Open up, Harry—it's me—Rock."

Still the door remained closed. "Who's with you?"

"Nobody."

THEN Rock could hear Grace talking to his daughter. Presently the door swung open, and Harry Garce faced him with a repeating rifle clutched in his hand.

"Come in," he said, when he saw that Rock was really alone.

Rock stepped into the room. Harry Grace closed and barred the door. Before a low door leading to a small side room stood Katie Grace, a lamp in her hand. She smiled faintly at Rock and put the lamp down.

"What do you want?" Harry Grace asked Rock. He was a medium sized man, with graying brown hair and quick, suspicious eyes.

"Harry," said Rock, "I come to tell you to clear out. There's a bunch comin' to lynch you tonight. Take your girl and two of the best horses you've got and *ride*. I'll stay here and hold them, if they come soon, till you can get clear."

"Would you do that, for me?" said Harry Grace, his eyes lighting up.

"For you, and your daughter," said

Rock. "But move, man. They may come anytime."

"I'm not running!" said Harry Grace flatly.

"Think of your daughter, man!" exclaimed Rock. "They'll tear this place down, drag you out and string you up before her eyes. Think of her."

Harry Grace looked first at his daughter, then he spoke again. "I'm not running."

"Then git something against that door, cover that window and get ready for a fight," said Rock. "Because we'll shore as hell'll have it, and soon."

"Wel?" said Harry Grace. "You stayin'?"

"I'm stayin'!" said Rock.

AGAIN Harry Grace looked at his daughter. Something passed between them, wordless, that Rock could not read. Harry Grace turned to Rock, smiling whimsically.

"Rock," he said, "come here and I'll show you why I can't run."

Even then Rock did not suspect what

was to follow. But when Grace pushed open the door before which Katie had been standing, and held a light into the little room so that Rock could see, Rock got a jolt that shook him to his toes. There stretched on a bed, with almost a week's growth of black stubble on his face, his cheeks sunken, his skin waxen lay Haave.

Rock would have fallen had not Harry Grace supported him.

"Dead?" Rock's lips formed the word clumsily.

Just then Haave opened his eyes. Saw his father looking at him with that expression of utter woe on his face and grinned gamely.

"'Lo, Pappy!" he said in a voice scarcely stronger than a whisper.

Rock's relief was so intense that it hurt. But before he could get down on his knees to talk to his boy, the dog outside went into paroxysms and Harry Grace came hurrying back into the room.

"Comin'!" he said briefly.

Rock hurried out just as a body of riders came to a halt outside the door. Someone hammered on the door with the butt of a six-shooter.

"Come out, Grace!" It was Petroff's voice, harsh and menacing.

"Get away from that door!" shouted Grace. "It's thick but it won't stop a forty-five ball, Petroff!"

There were quick steps away. Then Petroff's voice came again—from a distance.

"Come out, Grace, or we'll tear your damned shack down and drag you out!"

"I'll shoot the first man dead that touches that door!" said Grace loudly.

Outside there was a conference. They could hear the gabble of talk but could not distinguish the words. Rock looked about the cabin.

"You watch the window, Harry," he said. "I'll take care of the door. They're due for a surprise. They don't know I'm here, Katie, you keep back in that room, and keep down. Tell Haave not to get excited if the goin' gets a little hot in here. They'll probably bust that door in the first pass."

There was a rush outside. The door disintegrated at the first rush, and the window was dashed inward. Almost in a second, it seemed, the room was filled with men.

Rock shot Abe Liskey square in the mouth with his first shot, then they were on him in a body. He heard Harry Grace's rifle bellow once, then it was hand to hand and throat to throat. He smashed somebody in the face with his six-shooter

and was in turn struck from behind. The blow was a fierce one and he staggered against the wall. Had a brief, blurred glimpse of a knot of men over under the window, clubbing savagely at Harry Grace who was on the floor, trying gamely to get up.

The scene shot fresh power into Rock. He came off the wall with a driving rush that carried everything before him. Petroff came at him from the side, a clubbed six-shooter held high, Rock turned him a back somersault with a single powerful blow and had the satisfaction of seeing Petroff's boot soles twinkle, for one brief instant right in his face. Something exploded on the back of his head and he went to his knees. Three men detached themselves from the now motionless Harry Grace and came at him too. Rock tried to get to his feet; failed.

ROCK dashed his hand across his eyes to clear his vision of blood and hair. Then across his benumbed sensibilities came the sharp, swift explosions of a six-shooter thumbed expertly. That was the way Haave shot a gun, when he was strong and well. Rock thought he must be dreaming until one of the men rushing at him suddenly caught at his face and fell with blood spurting through his fingers. Another stopped, rocked back on his heels and fell backward with a sudden swift swoop. Another wilted and a sudden deathly quiet come over the room. The silence was more deafening that the terrific din that had prevailed. Across it cut Haave's voice, weak but sharp and clear:

"Up high, coyotes!"

Rock's vision cleared. Only two of the raiders remained on their feet and those two were trying very earnestly to reach the ceiling. In the doorway to the little room, supported by Katie Grace stood Haave with a smoking six-shooter in his hand and his eyes blazing smokily. He looked like a ghost in that white gown, his eyes, seemingly twice as big as normally.

Rock got up. He stumbled towards Haave, trying to say what was in his heart, but ony muttering incoherently.

"Don't get between us, Pappy!" Haave's warning brought Rock back to his full senses. "Katie, honey, couldn't you help pappy tie them two coyotes up. I can stand here all night."

Katie could and did. Then she made Haave take to his bed again. "You might open your wound, Haave!" she told him.

Haave grinned weakly at his father, but he didn't fight the bed. Rock stepped over and picked up Harry Grace. He was fearfully beaten, but breathing. Rock put him on a bunk just as a fresh rush of horse hoofs stormed up outside.

WITH a single bound Rock made the door, catching up his six-shooter as he went. Jess Kinder stuck his head into the door and found his nose not more than six inches from the black muzzle of Rock's gun. He backed off hastily.

"Don't shoot me, Rock!" he cried. "Don't shoot——"

He was plucked aside and Barney Baroosh stood there. The old man stared at Rock for a full moment without saying a word.

"Raiding," he said at length, "I come to admit that I was wrong about some things. I know some things now I didn't know before. I've come to make things right with Harry Grace. I'll pay him every cent he claims I owe him, with interest, if he'll agree to make good the cattle he sto—he took. And I'll take his count."

Rock dropped his gun.

"Baroosh," he said, "I reckon both of us was some off. But you'll have to come back later to talk to Harry. He's not able to talk. But if you'll clear this room of your foreman and son-in-law and a few others it'll help."

"I give you my word I didn't know anything about this," said Baroosh. "Not a thing."

He had three men with him. They cleared the room. Then Jess Kinder appeared. Rock faced him with set face.

"Jess," he said, "I want to ask you one question. And don't you lie to me, Jess! Did you know that Haave was layin' here too weak to move when you lied to me to get me out of the way so that gang could lynch Harry Grace? Did you know it, Jess?"

"Before God," swore Jess Kinder, "I didn't know it! And no matter what happens to me, I swear I was thinkin' mostly of you when I told you that lie, Rock. I didn't want you to git yourself killed."

"Who told Baroosh the raid was bein' staged?"

"I did! I got to thinkin' it wasn't right. Ask Baroosh if you don't believe me, Rock."

"Damn Baroosh!" said Rock. "You hide for town and send a doctor out here. Harry and Haave both need him."

Jess Kinder looked at Rock and marveled.

"Don't figure you need any attention yourself, do you Rock?" he asked gently.

"Me?" said Rock, astonished. "Hell, if I felt any better I couldn't stay on the ground!"

Flying Coupling

By DUANE HOPKINS

Author of "Target Yard," "Silver Dollar Division," etc.

FLYING couplings are dead against the rules, but Lane had five thousand tons of coal in his pants pocket that night. He drew out the waybills and slammed them on the caboose desk.

"A hundred loads," he groaned. "We'll never get this tonnage up Cumberland hill before dawn. Bill," he yelled up to the cupola, "are we in the Laurel block yet?"

"He just whistled for the Laurel board," said Bill above. "It's clear."

"Then give him a highball," ordered the freight conductor. "We ain't stopping."

There was a scuffling upstairs. Then the brakeman poked his head down over Lane's desk.

"Ain't stopping?" exclaimed the shack. "But we're picking up a pusher at Laurel."

"Don't I know it?" roared Conductor Lane. "How the hell could we get this string over the hump without a pusher? Just the same we ain't wasting the time to stop for him. Let him catch us on the fly."

"You're the doctor," grunted Bill, and climbing out on the caboose roof threw a fancy lantern at the engineer a mile ahead.

The train kept rolling. As the caboose trundled past the Laurel station, Lane stepped out on the rear platform and swung a tie-in to the helper engine standing on the wye. The pusher whistled an answer and moved into the main line behind the laboring coal drag.

Half a mile up the hill they came together, just before the train stalled on the grade. The big Mallet battleship nosed into the caboose, put her sixteen driving wheels to the push, and rammed in the coupling slack for sixty cars ahead. The tonnage kept going at a painful crawl, and Lane went back inside to his desk.

"Flying coupling, eh?" remarked the grizzled boomer who was sitting on one of the caboose bunks, smoking an odorous corncob pipe. He had come aboard at the last water stop, looking for a free ride. And as he carried an old brotherhood card, the caboose was his. "Against the rules, ain't it, a flying coupling?" he said.

"So they tell me," chuckled Lane. "But

"Like Riding a Bucking Mustang in a Kansas Cyclone While Being Shot at with Buckshot"

you can't call it dangerous at five miles an hour, and I want to get home before the hog law lays us out."

The boomer puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. "I saw a flying coupling once," he remarked, "that was made at a lot higher speed than this. Darn if it didn't save my life, too."

"Yeah?" said Lane, wondering how a rolling tie-in could save anybody's life. He scented a yarn coming on, and like most railroaders he enjoyed listening to the experiences of his wandering brothers. "Go ahead and spill it," he invited.

"Why not?" agreed the boomer, and stoking up the corncob, began his story.

THIS happened when I was firing freight in the Rockies. That was some time ago. It was before they ran a tunnel under Dedmon Pass, as the timetables called it. Railroaders used to call it Dead Man Pass, so you can imagine what the old track grade was like. It made you dizzy just to look at the steel draped over the divide.

One day I fired up Dead Man Pass on a coal extra with a booster engine, just like this train here tonight. Jake Ricker was running the pusher behind the caboose, and Sam McRae was my engineer on the head end.

First off, I want to say a word about Ricker and McRae. They were characters. Both were old-timers, mountain enginemen of the old school. Both had more than thirty years' seniority on the division. That was enough service to give them just about any passenger run on the line. The reason they were still on the freight board was their bad records.

Now don't get me wrong when I say that Ricker and McRae had bad records. I don't mean wrecks, accidents, poor running. Reckless running, yes; but not poor running. The mountains never held better runners than those two old veterans of the steep steel. Still, their records were black with demerit marks. Between them, Ricker and McRae had collected more demerits than any six other engineers on the entire system.

This was due to their habit of breaking the rules—like making flying couplings. Those two grim-bitten ancients just didn't give a damn for the rules. At one time or another they had broken every rule in the book. Whenever they were about to get set up to a passenger run—blooey! They'd break some rule to smithereens, pick up another flock of demerits, and get sunk deeper on the freight board. They progressed backward faster than they climbed ahead. It was a division joke that they'd end their days firing switch engines.

There was another curious thing about Ricker and McRae, too. They never spoke to each other. Not under any condition would they so much as nod. For seventeen years it had been that way. There had been some sort of fight between them once, and though the cause of the scrap was long forgotten by both, they still refused to notice each other when they met. I said that pair were characters, and they surely were.

WELL, we came up Dead Man Pass that day with our coal drag, McRae on the head end and Ricker pushing. We had a passenger meet ordered at Summit, so we took siding there on top of the Pass. As soon as the limited cleared, Ricker cut loose from our back end and ran up the main line as far as McRae's engine and the telegraph office. It was customary for helper engines to uncouple at Summit and run down the hill to Blue Canyon ahead of their trains. Blue Canyon was the division terminal, nineteen miles below the Pass.

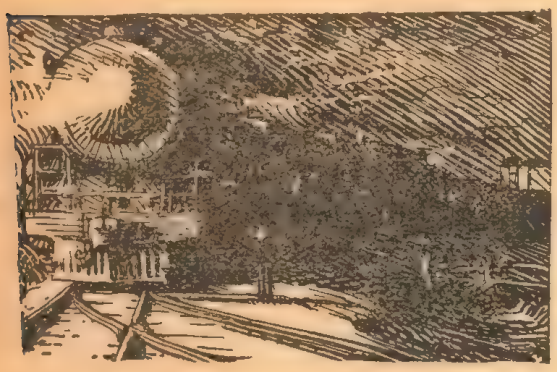
Ricker and McRae left their engines standing side by side, and both walked into the telegraph office to sign the register. Neither spoke to the other on the way in, nor did they seem aware of each other's existence as they stood shoulder to shoulder at the counter waiting for orders.

Bob Creel, the Summit telegraph operator, came up behind the counter with green

tissues and a clearance for both the helper and the train.

"All clear, Rick. You'd better get going," Creel told Ricker. And to McRae, "Same, Mac. Follow your helper out as usual. You haven't any spare time to clear Two's schedule out of Blue Canyon. Two's sacred, you know."

"Just a minute," broke in McRae. He frowned as he took his orders. "Tell the



engineer of that pusher not to leave yet, will you, Bob?"

Creel grinned. He turned slightly to Ricker standing right beside McRae.

"Rick, McRae wants you to hold on a minute."

Ricker rang the gong of the office spittoon with a squirt of tobacco juice.

"All right," he grunted. "But tell the engineer of that coal string that I haven't got time to guess riddles. I want to get clear for Two at Blue Canyon, even if he doesn't."

Grinning again, the operator turned back to McRae.

"Mac, Ricker doesn't want to be delayed. What's on your mind?"

"Air." McRae also rang the gong with a beautiful shot off the lower lip. "My air pump listens like a horse with the heaves. I'm afraid it'll fold up on me going down the hill and leave my tonnage without brakes. Get the dispatcher, Bob, and ask him can me and this other engineer change engines here."

"Okay. You'll want plenty of brakes on that coal going down the Dead Man."

CREEL dropped into a chair beside his telegraph instrument and called the dispatcher's office at Blue Canyon. The key clicked and chattered a bit. Then the operator looked up at McRae at the counter.

"Sheldon wants to know what's wrong with your air pump, Mac."

"How should I know?" The engineer shrugged. "I'm not a shop machinist. However, if Sheldon is real curious, I'll be glad to take the pump down and look into it for him. The overhaul shouldn't take more than twelve hours."

Creel bent to his key again. After some further clickings, he looked up at McRae once more.

"Sheldon thinks you two guys are stalling to make some overtime. He says if the train pump is dead, change engines and tie up here for further orders. But if the pump is still running, then get the hell on down the hill before you mess up Two's schedule."

McRae's eyes snapped a little under their bushy gray brows. Ricker was chewing his cud and looking out the window at far white peaks glistening in the sunlight.

"Tell Dispatcher Sheldon I'm ready to highball," said McRae tartly. "Tell the engineer of the pusher the same thing. We're going to town, Bentley," he added to the freight conductor, who had come in for his copies of the train orders.

"I just noticed our train line is leaking pretty bad," said Bentley, signing the sheet. "Half a dozen hoses are hissing. Are you certain, Mac, that your air pump will keep up the pressure?"

"My boy," said McRae, though Bentley was no youngster, "we can't be certain of anything in this life except death and taxes. The dispatcher says to come down off Dead Man. We're a-coming."

They left the office then. Bentley strolled back toward his caboose while McRae and Ricker walked to their engines. Walked but a step apart, but never once speaking or glancing at each other. The

habit of seventeen years of silence between them was hard to break, even though the grudge itself was lost in the limbo of forgotten memories.

Of course, it was simply a case of stubborn pride. Both men were too proud to be the first to speak. In that respect Ricker and McRae were alike, just as they were alike in their disregard for the rules of railroading, their long and not very honored service, and their ability to run the high country like a couple of fearless old pirates.

McRAE swung aboard his engine on the Summit siding, glanced at the air gauge and pulled on his gauntlets. Ricker, however, did not at once climb into the cab of the pusher on the main line alongside. Instead, he walked forward between the two engines and stood for a while listening to the gasp and wheeze of McRae's air pump. At last he bit off a fresh chew of plug, hauled himself up into his cab, and started the helper engine clanking down the long twisting grade to Blue Canyon.

After Ricker's engine had disappeared around a rocky curve below, McRae dragged the coal train out of the siding. There was a stop while the rear brakeman closed the switch behind, a stop that was also an air test. Then, twelve minutes after Ricker's pusher had left Summit, McRae's tonnage started slowly down off Dead Man Pass.

It was a battle of brakes from the start. On and off, on and off, with the air pump racing and the gauge needles twitching. McRae's hand was on the brass every second, his eye on the pressure, his ear on the pump stroke. Brake shoes dragged and ground. Coal cars jounced and swayed. Flanges screeched to every curve. The smell of hot grinding iron was in the mountain air.

A mile, two miles, three. Five miles, six. Then it came. The pump faltered. The plunge of the pistol slowed, speeded up, slowed again, stopped. The twin hands of the air gauge fluttered, fell, died on the bottom pin.

McRae stood up abruptly. Grasping the whistle bar, he sent a wild scream ringing through the mountains. It was the dread signal, the call for hand brakes.

Out of the caboose like ants came Bentley, the flag and the swing man. Over the tender in a jump went the head brakeman from the cab. With more time they might have done some good. They might have brought the tonnage under control. But there was not time enough. Before they could fairly get started setting brakes, the train speed had become so great that they had to give up. It was impossible for a man to make his way across the high-piled coal gondolas without being thrown off on the curves. Most of the hand brakes could not be reached at all.

McRae looked back from his cab window. He saw the trainmen all hanging for dear life to the brake wheels. He saw the twisting, rushing train scatter coal on the curves as it picked up more speed with every wheel turn. He felt the tonnage pushing, the downgrade pulling, and the Dead Man, perhaps, laughing.

McRae shook his old head and looked over at me. I was firing for him, you remember.

"We're headed for a spill on the rocks, lad," he said sadly. "You'll never have a better chance to jump than right now."

Nor a worse chance, I decided. Jumping at that speed would have been suicide.

"I'll stick as long as you do," I told him.

"It's too bad, son." He looked at me gravely. "A young fellow like you. Some day they'll drive a tunnel under the Dead Man and put a stop to this slaughter. Only nobody on this train will live to see it."

That's what I thought, too. I was plenty scared all right, but not panicky.

"Isn't there anything you can do, Mac?" I asked.

"Reverse her, maybe," he said. "But it won't do any good. We're a hopeless run-

away. We're going to jump the iron—turn over on one of these curves. Then we'll roll down the mountainside so far it'll take a searching party a week to find what's left of us."

He grabbed the Johnson bar and hossed her over. Reversing at that speed was bound to tear up something. It stripped the valve gear.

"And that finishes us," said McRae, testing the throttle and getting no result, either forward or reverse.

Just then something ahead of us caught his attention. He stared out the cab window. His mouth dropped open. His face turned livid.

"What is it, Mac?" I yelped. "You look like you saw a ghost."

"It's worse than a ghost!" McRae seemed thunderstruck. "Of all the boneheaded, idiotic tricks, this is the daffiest piece of railroading I ever did see. Somebody has gone plumb loony around here, or my name ain't Sam McRae."

I DIDN'T get what he was driving at. I poked my head out the gangway for a look ahead. The wind almost took my eyebrows off, but I got a glimpse of a black object disappearing around a curve in front of us.

"Looks to me," I said, "like the back end of a tender."

"It is!" bellowed McRae with a curse. "Jake Ricker's helper engine! Why, the old fool should be in Blue Canyon by this time. But he's been loafing—loafing down the hill ahead of us. He must have gone nuts. He knew dang well I was behind him with all this tonnage and a bad air pump."

"That's right," I remembered. "And now that we're on the loose, Rick will have to do some fancy running to get away from us."

"He *can't* get away from us," stormed McRae. "It ain't possible—not now. If he runs that fast he'll jump a curve. And if he don't run that fast we'll hit him and all go to hell together. Whatever possessed Ricker to get himself into this death trap is beyond me. I do hate to see a man commit suicide in broad daylight."

We were zooming through a series of short curves and rocky cuts. When we rocketed out on a bit of straightaway, Ricker's engine was only a few hundred feet ahead of us.

McRae screamed the whistle at him, rather hopelessly. Ricker was already picking up speed, but we were gaining on him fast.

When the helper engine careened into the next curve, Ricker looked back at us. He hung far out the cab window, and waved an arm toward the rear of his tender. His fireman started to climb back over the coal bunker at the same time.

Then they shot around the rocks out of sight. And we streaked into the curve with a screech and a roar.

McRae's expression had suddenly changed. New hope was in his look.

"Maybe," he said, scratching his chin, "old Ricker ain't as crazy as I figured. I reckon he aims to tie into us and give us some brakes."

"What!" I yelled, astounded. "A flying coupling at this breakneck speed? Man alive, it can't be done! Our flanges are barely holding the curves. If these engines touch we're gone. The slightest bump will throw us over the cliff."

McRae looked me full in the eye. A smile was on his lined and weather-beaten face.

"We won't bump," he said calmly. "Jake Ricker may be an old fool, but he's a mountain runner. He's an engineer. No, lad, these two engines won't bump when they come together."

We hit another short stretch of straightaway. The pace was terrific now. Ricker's racing engine was only a hundred feet ahead of our pilot. The gap was still narrowing, but more slowly.

McRae fought his way forward along the running board to make the coupling. There was no trainman to do it. Our crew had tied themselves in knots around

the brake wheels of the jumping coal cars. Not a gondola but had hurled off its top load on the dizzy curves.

RICKER'S engine eased back closer and closer to us. Fifty feet, twenty, ten, five. McRae was at the pilot coupling. Rick's fireman stood on the tender tank, arms upraised, signaling his engineer the distance between the drawheads.

Four feet, three, two. Then a curve. Both engines heeled far over on the outside rail. My heart almost knocked loose a rib as I felt our inside drivers lift from the steel. Up off the inner rail of the bend jumped the whirling wheels. Up with every lightning upthrust of the counterbalances. Down with a crash each time the

wheel weights spun down. Down and up, the engine just teetering on the raised outer rail. It was awful. But we righted, came out of it, and only a step apart the two engines continued the mad race.

McRae was down on the footboard. He clung desperately to the drawbar. The jouncing pilot threw him from side to side, flung him up and down. The wind nearly took his breath away. He was half blinded by ballast gravel whipped up by the engine ahead. Old Mac was in a tough spot. It was like riding a bucking mustang in a Kansas cyclone while being shot at with buckshot. But Mac was holding tight in the saddle.

The engines were almost together now. Less than a foot between the drawheads. Six inches, four, two. Then the knuckles touched, kissed lightly, drew a little apart, settled back together and gently locked. The coupling was made. Jake Ricker was indeed an engineer.

So was Sam McRae. And Mac's work wasn't finished yet. He had to couple up the air hoses. That was a real job in itself, considering he had only one hand to work with while he hung from the pilot with the other hand like a monkey. It was difficult and it was dangerous. But he managed to get the hoses nipped together, and then he jammed open the angle cocks. The fireman on the tank above clasped his hands over his head, and Ricker took control of the train air.

Five minutes later, with fire spurting from every brake shoe back to the caboose, the freight thundered around the last sharp curve and ground to a stop in the division yards at Blue Canyon.

McRAE climbed down off the pilot and leaned weakly against the cylinder of his engine. Ricker swung out of the front cab and walked back to where McRae stood. For a long minute the two enginemen looked at each other in silence —the first time in seventeen years that they had so much as exchanged glances.

Then Ricker sent a squirt of tobacco juice spattering on the cinders, and spoke.

"Howdy, McRae."

McRae also spat into the cinders.

"Hy, Ricker."

And so the ice was broken at last.

"Well, Mac, I guess we sort of made a flying coupling, didn't we?"

"We sure did. Flying is the word. Thanks for your air, Rick. It came in right handy."

"I thought it would," said Ricker. "I didn't like the sound of your pump up at Summit."

"So you hung back and waited to see what would happen," said McRae. "That's what I call guts."

"No more guts than you had, Mac, when you climbed between these engines and hooked them together with one hand. That really took some nerve. Anyway,

all's well that ends well. I see you didn't lose any trainmen on the hill, and we got clear for Two's precious schedule as ordered."

No. 2, crack limited, was standing in front of the Blue Canyon station. And out of the station came a heavy-set, grim-faced man. He strode straight across the yard tracks toward the two freight engineers. It was the Old Man himself, Lang, the mountain superintendent.

"Harumph," said Lang sternly as he came up. "Did you two enginemen have orders to double-head this train down from Dedmon Pass?"

"No, sir," said McRae. "Fact is, we didn't double-head down the Dead Man. Only half way down."

"Eh?" barked the super. "You mean you recoupled on the grade? Where did you stop to do it?"

"We didn't stop," put in Ricker. "We tied together on the fly."

"Oh." Lang was sarcastic. "So you two are still breaking rules, are you? A flying coupling this time. At what speed were you traveling when you coupled?"

"I'm not sure," said McRae, "but I'd say our speed was just a shade over a thousand miles an hour."

Lang wasn't dense. He had a pretty good idea of what had happened. Besides, he got the story in a couple of profane sentences from Conductor Bentley, who came up panting from the back end.

"If Dispatcher Sheldon ordered you out of Summit with a defective air pump," said Lang, "he will have to do a lot of explaining. As for you, McRae and Ricker, you will both be assessed the usual number of demerits for breaking the rule against flying couplings—namely, that no engine shall couple into a train while the train is in motion. These new demerits, I am sorry to say, will give both of you about the blackest records of any engineers I have ever known in a lifetime of railroading.

"However," went on the official, "in view of your remarkable efforts in avoiding a wreck today, I am going to cancel every demerit standing against the records of both of you. You start from here with a clean sheet. And with your years of seniority, that means the pick of the passenger runs for you. That is, if you think you can obey the rules from now on."

"Well," said McRae doubtfully, "I reckon I lost my copy of the book of rules nigh onto thirty years ago."

"Me too," said Ricker. "And the company never did furnish me with another copy."

Lang couldn't hold back a chuckle.

"You two old rule-breakers are hopeless," he declared. "But you deliver your trains safely, and I guess that's the most important rule of all. So tomorrow you'll be over there."

And he pointed across the tracks to the proud No. 2, just pulling out, double-headed, to climb the Dead Man.

SMART SHERIFF

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Blood Law," "Last Call," etc.

The Trail of the Red Fox of Samson's Hell Would Have Been a Hard One to Follow —But the Young Sheriff Was Smart After All

HE WAS around thirty, lean and wiry, red of hair and complexion, and he had cold, cunning, pale-blue eyes. For years he'd been a thorn in the side of every law officer within a radius of twenty leagues. Once in his old home section, Samson's Hell—aptly named, it was, this extremely wild and rugged spot in Tennessee's mountains—the United States Army couldn't have caught him, and he always got there first. Chalked up against him the law had two outright killings and robberies by the score. Besides, he'd figured in innumerable cases of malicious mischief. Jit Cady, alias the Red Fox, had a queerly perverted sense of humor.

Gathered in billygoat-bearded Unc' Johnny Gregg's combination store and post office, high in the foothills adjacent to Samson's Hell, were a dozen hillmen who chewed tobacco and swapped talk as they awaited the return of a messenger whom Unc' Johnny had sent to town early in the afternoon. Suddenly a scraggly-bearded mountain man stopped short in the middle of a coon-hunt tale and began to stare toward the front doorway. The others looked and saw framed in the dark rectangle the lean figure of outlawed Jit Cady.

"Howdy," said the coon-hunter.

The Red Fox's right hand was on the butt of an old, Frontier model revolver that he carried inside the belt that held his jeans trousers in place. He narrowed his cold eyes against the lamplight, and spoke.

"Hi, Sam. Any news from the Johnsboro 'lection yit?"

The coon-hunter shook his head soberly. "No. Manny Hatfield went to town, but he ain't got back yit."

"Won't be long though," muttered Unc' Johnny Gregg. "Manny rid my hoss, and didn't have to walk: I reckon you air anxious to know who's been 'lected high sheriff, Jit."

"Yeuh," Cady admitted, "and ef hit's that smart Les Hayner——"

Hayner had promised the voters that,

if elected, he would jail the Red Fox or bust a rib trying. Small wonder that the outlaw broke off with an oath now. He stepped backward and into the early night, found an empty box on the roofless platform at the front of the hewn-log store building and sat down on it.

After an hour, his quick ears picked up a clatter of hoofs. It was Manny Hatfield, and he brought news to the effect that Les Hayner had been elected sheriff. Jit Cady swore, and stole off toward Samson's Hell. Two hours of threading laurel seas that would have puzzled a squirrel, and he reached the crude brush shelter that for the present was home to him.

"Fust thing, I'll l'arn that smart Les Hayner a lesson, i-god," he told himself as he rolled up in a long unwashed blanket on the ground. "I'll make this hyar whole county laugh at him. See ef I don't!"

TAKING over the office of high sheriff kept Hayner—a young man, clear-eyed, clean-limbed, fairly efficient—so busy for a while that he had no time for setting out on the trail of the elusive Red Fox. Early in the evening of the third day of his encumbency, while his two deputies and the jailer were out for supper, he looked up from a pile of papers on his desk and saw inside the muzzle of Jit Cady's old Frontier model Colt.

"Nary word, Les, and nary move," Cady warned, "ef you don't want to be buried tomorrer. Git that, i-god?"

The new sheriff grinned a little, sat quite still. Cady was more dangerous than hot dynamite, and Hayner knew it. Deftly the outlaw ran his left hand over the officer's clothing, located a wallet, snatched it out and pocketed it. Then he took a ring of large keys from the desk.

"Stand up, smart feller," he ordered.

Les Hayner obeyed. He was still grinning a little.

The bad man's right forefinger was tight on the trigger of his Colt. He went on: "Now you march—that way," indicating a door that led into the whitewashed jail corridor.

Hayner marched. Cady locked him in one of his own jail cells.

"Smart sheriff, ain't you? Well, how you like that!"

The Red Fox then ran for the street door, tossing the ring of keys to the office desk as he went. Just outside, he yelled: "Help! Help! Rob—ber!" and darted around a corner of the squat brick building to be lost in the darkness of a rubbish-littered alley.

"Yeuh," he jubilated, "the whole county'll laugh at Les Hayner now, shore!"

In this he was correct. Les took it all good humoredly, on the surface, but inwardly he boiled.

For days on end Jit Cady kept religiously to the trackless wilderness that was called Samson's Hell where no lowlander could hope to find him. He had two friends—scraggly-bearded louts named Steptoe Hutton and Lije Brett—whom he sent to Unc' Johnny Gregg's combination store and post office for the little that he had to have to eat, and for news. There was a dearth of news. Apparently Sheriff Les Hayner had forgotten that there was such a person as Jit Cady, alias the Red Fox, on earth.

THEN Steptoe Hutton returned from Gregg's with this:

"Jit, they air some mail fer you down at the sto'. I tried to git Unc' Johnny to lemme take hit and see ef I couldn't somehow manage to locate you—" here Steptoe winked—"but Unc' Johnny said the postal regilations didn't 'low him to do that. Said hit war registered mail, and you would haf to come in and sign up fer hit. 'Tain't no letter, Jit, but a pastebo'd box 'bouten a foot long."

The red one blinked, then narrowed his cold, cunning eyes.

"A box; huh? Mebbe it air a trick o' that smart new sheriff's, to git me down at the sto' and ketch me thar."

"Me, I dunno 'bouten that," said his friend. "I wunner whut air in the box, Jit?"

"I air busy a-wunnerin' myself," Cady said. After a moment, he continued, "I ain't afeared to shoot hit out with Les Hayner, i-god. I done shot two sojers a'ready, and shootin' another 'un wouldn't make 'em hang me a inch higher—ef they war to ketch me. And yit—i-god, Step, I ain't a-goin' to take no chanst I don't need to take."

It was noontime then. Jit Cady fried out a few strips of fatback bacon over an almost smokeless dry-wood fire, made coffee in a tomato-can, opened a nickel box of crackers, ate piggishly and gave Hutton

the little that was left. The two then sat around for an hour, and did no talking.

Curiosity as to what could be in the registered package began to consume the outlaw. There was a bare chance that it was not a trick to get him out of his Samson's Hell refuge and down to the store, he figured.

"Step," he said to the now dozing Hutton, "you find Lije Brett, and you and him hustle down to Gregg's. You and Lije watch out and keep yore ears open fer some sign o' Les Hayner. Jest atter dark, you leave Lije a-watchin' and meet me at that big oak in the pasture field this side o' Gregg's, and repo't to me whuther you've seed or hyeard anything o' Hayner. Y'unnerstand me now, Step?"

"Shore, Jit, I unnerstand."

Hutton yawned, rose, vanished in the laurel sea.

SHORTLY after he had gone, the Red Fox left his lair for a high point in the foothills. Lying there behind a clump of scrubby sheep laurel, he could see the Johnsville road stretching into the dim distance below like a crooked dirty ribbon. No rider was on that road, no vehicle. Cady watched until sunset, then hurried down across ridge and ravine and to the big oak in Gregg's pasture. Darkness was upon him when he reached the tree.

Before long Steptoe Hutton came.

"Air that you, Jit? Well, they ain't no news, no kind; ain't seed anything o' Hayner, me and Lije ain't, ner we ain't hyeard nothin' 'bouten him. Lije, he air still down yanner beyant the sto' front a-watchin'. Unc' Johnny closed up, few minutes ago, and went home. I reckon that registered box ain't no trick, Jit, mebbe."

"I reckon hit ain't nuther, mebbe," Jit agreed. "Anyhow, I got to see whut's in hit. Come on, Step."

Unc' Johnny Gregg lived in a hewn-log house a few rods back of the combination store and post office. Peering cautiously through windows, Cady soon spied the billygoat-bearded old man at supper.

"Go to the front thar and call him out, Step," Jit whispered.

Hutton did it. A slender dark form joined Hutton the moment Gregg appeared on his narrow front porch.

"Hit's me, Unc' Johnny. Hit's Jit Cady. I air come down fer to git my mail."

"After post office hours——" began Gregg.

"I air come down fer to git my mail, Unc' Johnny," repeated the bad man, and now there was granite in his drawling voice.

"We-ell, all right," Gregg said.

With Cady following, and Hutton following Cady, Unc' Johnny went to the rear of the store building. He produced a key and unlocked the door.

"You stay hyar," Jit whispered to Hutton, "and watch."

He entered on Gregg's heels. The old

man felt his way through the darkness and to the front of the store, scratched a match and lighted a large, hanging oil lamp, then stepped into the post office corner. He placed an inked pen and a slip of paper on the counter within reach of Cady.

"Sign that," said he, "and I'll give you the box."

Cady scrawled his name on the slip and received the package. He tore it open. At first he could find nothing except crumpled pieces of newspaper. But under this there was something small and heavy, in brown wrapping-paper, and beneath the twine that held it together he found a card that bore these typewritten words:

Compliments of Sheriff L. Hayner.

"What the—hell!" gasped the red one.

He'd barely got that out when a hand swished under his right elbow and snatched away his gun. At the same time the muzzle of another gun struck his ribs and held there—and the hard voice of Sheriff L. Hayner came in familiar phrases:

"Nary a word, nary a move, if you don't want to be buried tomorrow. Get that?"

The outlaw, weaponless, turned ashen, wilted fast. Les Hayner winked at Gregg, and went on talking:

"Wondering how I got here, Jit, when you had two men watching? Very simple, that was. You see, I came ahead of your little present there, and hid myself in the store loft. As for those two friends of yours, I guess I've got no quarrel with them; I'm willing to believe they helped you because they were afraid not to."

Brett and Hutton had been eavesdropping at the front and back doors respectively, just as the young law officer had expected. Hayner's ears now caught the sounds their cowhide boots made on the stony ground as they fled toward Samson's Hell. He grinned, and spoke again.

"That was quite some trick you played on me, Jit—robbing me in my own office, locking me up in my own jail, then yelling for help! But I claim I went you one better. I admit I was what you called me, 'smart,' in getting you out of your thickets and to where I could nail you as I did. Curiosity, they say, killed a cat, and I saw no reason why curiosity shouldn't kill a fox too.

"But you won't fully understand me, Jit, until you've opened that little package there in your hands. Go ahead—see what's in it."

Once more Hayner grinned. The outlaw's fingers shook as he broke the twine and took away the brown wrapping-paper. He found himself staring at a shining new pair of handcuffs!

"Now put the pretty bracelets on," ordered Les Hayner.

Jit Cady, alias the Red Fox, put the pretty bracelets on.

Where the White Peaks of the Andes Ringed a Radium Mine, Lon Dyke Carried on the High Tradition of a Fighting Family.

TREACHERY IN THE ANDES

By BERTON E. COOK

Author of "New Lyons for Old," "Those Invincible Flaggs," etc.

I

ALONZO DYKE'S first sensation was a medley of throbs. His head was a vast radio turned full on and a score of stations were spilling into one. The uproar shook him, it pained and jarred him unmercifully, for Dyke was struggling doggedly back to consciousness.

Now he was here, now gone again. Dimly he recognized the steady, relentless vibration of the ship's screw, another vicious throb; but the tumult in his beset skull surpassed it, was closer and more poignant.

At long length he moved uneasily and paid dearly for it. Every battered bone in his shoulders pained. In his left arm a pin prick stung . . . until his throbbings merged, crescended to a din. Then he slipped away, 'way back once more into that cool, welcome void of darkness. Dyke dozed.

Off and on, here and gone. Late afternoon whisked into the sudden dark of tropic nightfall. Again he revived, this time to weird visions. Snatches of remembered phrases mobbed his brain, they gyrated in a mad, whirling wheel . . . . until the wheel slowed, steadied and vanished in a cold, blue beam of light. The moon was shining in through the open port.

Dyke's eyes clung to it desperately because his subconscious mind insisted. He clung until, abruptly, he became alert. It was moonlight—over there! On the wrong side of the cabin. How could his porthole cross the stateroom?

Despite the resentment in his neck, his back, he sat up in the bunk. Before his narrow world could slip away again he reached and switched on the light—to find no baggage, nothing that was his. This was not his cabin at all. His was number —what? He fumbled his pockets for his brass key with the number on it. The key was gone.

By degrees he reached conclusions. Some one had cracked him on the head and taken that key. Now let's see, the last thing he could recall was—oh, he'd been making small talk with that Mrs. Van Wye. Yes; at the rail, on deck. Charming bouquet, Mrs. Van Wye. Charming moonlight, too; made a path of fresh silver on the night sea. And her dress had been blue. No, not personally taken up with the lady, but she was interesting in a way, had been everywhere, knew all sorts of people. Fact was, she'd rather made him feel provincial and dull. All the same he hadn't spilled anything important about his mission to Puerto San Rey or the Andes mine. Yet, he hadn't wanted her to rate him an ordinary tourist; she had been impressed, too, he'd seen that much in the way she'd talked, the intelligent questions she had asked.

That was it! The blasted sneak thief—whoever he was—had sidled up just when they were most interested in their conversation and bludgeoned him. Aye, and frisked him—but Mrs. Van Wye! What had become of her?

DYKE swayed to his feet and staggered to the door. It was locked. No key in it, none anywhere. All he could do was ring for a steward. Blast it, the whole ship would know about this affair before he got out of it.

He pressed a button and waited. Outside the porthole the ship was quiet enough. Eight bells rang somewhere forward. Eight. Was it midnight or four A.M.? He began to orient himself by that bell's tone. His own cabin must be directly across the midship alleyway behind him. Of couse—and it was number twenty-four!

The steward eyed him. He followed this swaying figure across the alleyway, watched him try the knob on twenty-four.

"Thet thar room 's vacated, suh. We all reckoned you'd gone asho' in Puerto San Rey, suh."

"San Rey? I am going ashore at San Rey."

"Huh. Sorry, suh. We done cleared there five hours gone."

"You . . . What are you thinking of to let me lie in that cabin?" Dyke ran his finger over his eyes.

"Dunno, suh. Nobody had that stateroom you come out of, not this trip. We nevah knowed you was in there a-tall. No, suh."

"And Mrs. Van Wye, is she all right? I was talking with her earlier this evening on deck."

"Last ev'nin', suh. She done gone asho' in San Rey, she and thet gen-mun she—er—she travels with, suh."

Travels with! Light began to penetrate Alonzo Dyke's fog. So Mrs. Van Wye was traveling with a . . . this steward had

called him a gentleman. Vague alarm stirred Dyke; just how much had he told that woman? He cursed himself for a fool. Anyway he had not mentioned radium, of that he was certain, but he had hinted that he had something a bit dangerous to do—vain, boasting idiot! For that, he now possessed nothing but the clothes he stood in. Completely cleaned out unless they had missed . . . Well, this was indeed a fazer; he still had his billfold. Only two tenspots left, to be sure, and thank the Lord the letter was still in it.

Dyke's relief in his latest discovery proved its importance; the letter was his all-important credentials to Hargreave, the manager of the Andes mine. He recalled its vital importance when old Ben Dyke, his uncle, while signing it had grunted part of it aloud to be sure of it: " . . . *fake one shipment of radium. Let my nephew follow soon after with the real stuff because we cannot afford to lose another ten thousand as we certainly did when the other shipment went astray.*

"*Keep Alonzo's relation to me quiet. Permit him to look around freely while he waits . . .*"

Thus Benjamin Dyke had repeated the vital part of the letter and, inordinately solemn about it, signed and passed it to Lon. Tonight, letter and Lon, however, were somewhere beyond Puerto San Rey on the Pacific Ocean. What a shock this would have been to the elder Dyke, had he but known!

Lon Dyke's jaw ground to. Somehow he must get back to San Rey, thence on quickly to the mine. No wonder Heidel, his uncle's new partner, had waxed skeptical of his fitness for the errand. And both Dykes had been so positive he'd come through—only to fall for a con pair of friskers.

It occurred forcibly to Lon, now, Heidel himself had been at the mine when the last radium output had left there some two months ago. He recalled Heidel talking about it, almost taunting him: "That stuff was seized on its way to the coast. The train was raided on a broad, barren plateau; there's miles on miles of those barrens after you climb out of that Andes valley. And the stuff has to come out by ore train which is slow, too slow for the dangerous country it crosses. There's where your big risk lies, young man."

Yes, half-a-dozen—were they peons, Indians or mestizos?—had caught the train creeping, struggling up a stiff grade on the undulating plateau. Would they repeat? If so, what would be Alonzo Dyke's best move to save the radium? Whatever he did, he'd better make good at it; his entire future hung upon his success in the venture. Also the affairs of old Ben Dyke, had Lon but known it.

BENJAMIN DYKE'S sharp brain had made the Keystone Haematite Company; today it was a new, reluctant partnership. Max Heidel had come to its rescue with a timely blood transfusion. The blood was quick cash and long credit.

By a whim of fate in the little understood Andes Mountains, old Ben Dyke's engineers had spotted pitchblende on their concession. Immediately Ben had hurried down there to verify it. While there, he and his laboratory specialists, in a wave of commingled hard work and inspiration, had developed a process for extracting radium from the ore that was revolutionary; it was surprisingly less costly than the usual procedure. Ben came away on a wave of enthusiasm; he had unearthed a bonanza!

His enthusiasm got a chill when he returned to cold facts and ledgers back in Philadelphia. Down there on the spot, in the heat of experiment, he had wirelessed to the cable station branch and on north for equipment. Expensive chemicals had come, everything that would further the venture, regardless of the bills. Back at his desk, however, the bills came uppermost. He had created a remarkable process for getting radium bromide out of an Andes mountain, but he had spent his entire reserve to get it going—on the hunch that it would pay for itself directly. Soon as he could

afford it, he hoped to patent the scheme.

Added to all this worry of pressing bills, he found another. It was accumulated mail and runout charters and current expenses; and nary a red copper in the till. Everything bearing the financial reputation of Keystone Haematite, everything that had made life worth living for old Ben, had been poured into the creation of a combination lab' and extraction process plant in that Andes project. Ben Dyke's hair turned snowy white.

So he borrowed in New York. He mortgaged everything but his eyebrows. Not a word, however, to anybody about his prospective bonanza in South America; no hint of the remarkable discovery of pitchblende there or the equally remarkable process. Those were secrets and he hugged them close under the cloak of invented excuses for his immediate cash demands. So close, though, that young Lon Dyke had detected the whitened hair, the odd mixture of worry and concealment and dogged faith that was driving his uncle down the scales from a wiry, lively 156 pounds to a mere 117.

Then came a showdown in New York and Ben Dyke returned from his obdurate creditors. He came chastened and he came not alone; one, Heidel, was his new partner. Alonzo Dyke had soon observed that this Heidel had means, that he lived lavishly. He learned that Heidel spent much upon aviation, his hobby, and by it traveled where—as he boasted—the fishing was perfect and escape from business calls complete. Yes, Heidel could afford to wait until the radium bromide output should prove the bonanza it promised to become.

SEVERAL times Lon overheard Heidel attempt to buy Keystone Haematite outright, but Ben had fought him off; the price offered, under conditions of the moment, was ridiculous. Too, Ben refused to let go of his life's work—and always he had mentioned his nephew's future here. Lon had noticed that.

Then the great day arrived when a tiny tube of white crystals sealed in thick lead in a small oaken casket left the Andes lab'. It started for the South American west coast, for the ship bound north to Philadelphia. It became life and death matter, almost, for old Ben, a morsel of crust coming to a desperate Lazarus.

That shipment of radium bromide never reached the Chilean coast.

For two wretched months since that terrible blow, Heidel had talked purchase, flown, fished and assuaged creditors. For two tense months the lab' had gone on extracting mere pinches of radium from tons of ore while the ore ships brought the routine cargoes of haematite in chunks and powder through the canal to market.

Those two months were hell for old Ben. He warded off Heidel's offers, between battles he learned of a world-wide radium trust. Had this octopus, through banks, learned of his Andes bonanza? Had its tentacles been in the theft of his first radium shipment to sweep away the ten thousand dollars it represented to him? Common sense and business experience told Ben no, if that trust had objected to his competition they'd have made him offers before resorting to theft. And yet . . .

Thus matters had seethed. Now the second shipment of radium salt was about ready to start its hazardous trip out of the lab'. Heidel had refused the big expense of insuring it in transit and old, harassed Ben had awakened one morning to the awful realization that if this lot of radium went awry he'd never live to see a third one. His heart was a-flutter. Though he told nobody, he was experiencing those warning jabs up his left arm. The successful movement of this second bit of radium, therefore, did indeed spell life or death for Benjamin Dyke. Hence the desperate plan to send his only kinsman after it while Heidel droned, "Take it easy, man. Relax. We'll have the ore train sufficiently guarded this time—and what on earth could your nephew do about it if he were held up? Keep him out of this. The

other lot got away in a surprise attack, there'll be no surprise this time."

"Lon might's well start his career with us this way as any," Ben insisted. "He's my logical successor here." Ben considered Heidel only a partner for the moment.

"You forget," Heidel warned. "We are partners, both must agree to a new hand in the business . . . and I have a son nearly ready to step into something like this."

That was one too many for Ben. He shouted, "I founded Keystone. I shall stake everything I've got that Lon Dyke'll fetch us this next lot of radium!" He added more quietly, "Like as not he'll find out where the other lot went, too."

And Heidel had laughed in pity at an aged man's boastings. But he had dropped the issue there.

IT WAS the recollection of that laugh which brought Alonzo Dyke up, all standing. This and his costly encounter with the con pair. A fine start he had made while his uncle waited breathlessly in Philadelphia for his success!

He doused his head in cold water and called on the captain.

"Wha-at? You? I thought you left

us at San Rey. My Lord, your baggage did go ashore!" the captain exclaimed.

Dyke laughed ruefully. "All but myself went, yes." Then he admitted in detail what had befallen him . . . "I can't understand why I was knocked out so long —unless it's this." He exhibited a red spot on his arm. "Looks like a shot of dope went in here. What?"

The skipper needed but one glance. "Some of us should have warned you, Mr. Dyke; those two are a fast team. They travel these freighter-cruise boats for the pickings, they're random adventurers. She selects the most likely looking persons and he does the rest. Damn 'em!" He went to a port-hole and scanned the coast. "We must be off La Vied' . . . pretty close to it anyway." He wheeled to Dyke: "I'll put in at La Vied' and charter the first decent-looking boat that comes alongside. I'll have it run you back to Puerto San Rey it's the best I can do now. Damn it, this sort of thing reflects on our line."

Late the next morning came Puerto San Rey, a rough-and-tumble huddle of mud huts with thatched tops. They rose in tiers up the mountainside beyond a long jetty and between jetty and tiers the wind lifted whirls of brown ore dust off the ore pile beyond the jetty to deposit it everywhere. San Rey was downright ugly.

Lon Dyke stepped ashore in the fierce sunlight with nothing in hand, and a sunburned countenance about to peel. He went directly to the ore terminal at the jetty and asked about trains to the Keystone iron mine.

"Cripes, how many—they was a speshul car hooked onto yestiddy's inbound. Went east d'rec'ly the boat come in." The man said it as though defending the railroad; it had done its part.

"Uhuh," Dyke grunted. He understood; having failed to appear in time to occupy the "speshul," he had only himself to blame that it had gone back to the mountains vacant.

BUT THE trainman had no time to waste on tramps, he hurried on. And Dyke still had to get to the mine. He tried in vain to talk ore train schedules with a chance peon, with two sleepy mestizos. Nobody could or would speak English, all appeared as dull and stodgy as those dun mud houses in their background.

"Hey, you with the mule!" he shouted in despair to a mixed breed baker. "When's

the next train go? Choo-choo. Poosha. Train!"

The mule dozed. The baker waved a loaf—when Lon heard a woman's shrill barrage of vocal fury. In English! In a shack that was too obviously a saloon. She was railing at the barkeep. Dyke made a bee line for her.

"Pardon me, madam. Can you tell——"

The woman wheeled and stared. It was Mrs. Van Wye, and her rage turned swiftly to crimson defiance.

"We-ell?" She plunked her arms akimbo. "What're you here for? What're you going to do—about it?"

Dyke measured his words slowly. "Mrs. Van Wye, I believe. Hum. Where is your gen-tle-man friend?"

She exploded a bomb of vile names. "That . . . cleared out on me, left me stranded here. Me! We came ashore—" she swung a comprehensive arm in scorn—"to this punk hole in the dust . . . then he slipped me."

"Where'd he go?"

"Where? Back on that ship, for gosh sake where else could he go?" She patted her waist cunningly to add, "I'm okay, though. The little lady can take care of herself. He shared his boodle with her, that guy did—when he was asleep." She certainly read the expression on Dyke's face at that raw, vinous confession for she hastened to blurt out, "Isn't much, but——"

Dyke considered this story of the proverbial woman scorned. Now he cut in to ask, "Pretty sour about him, aren't you?"

"Plen-ty. And wise to his racket, too. He's a dumb fool to try that fadeout on me, of all people. Fooey!"

The barkeep sent Dyke a comprehensive wink over Mrs. Van Wye's shoulder. It came slowly and it conveyed the suggestion that the dame was bluffing. So Dyke gathered and he hesitated over an impulse; his own pride had suffered in his last meeting with the madam and she had certainly been the crook's ally. Nevertheless he produced his billfold.

"Tough-looking place, this, to dump any woman," he mused aloud. He handed her good American money to add, "Here, I'll split with you if that'll get you started. There'd be more in this billfold, you know, but for certain 'stunning' circumstances." He grinned.

But the woman laughed outright and the laugh was brittle. "Hoie! Mr. Dyke, you're a swell guy. Swell!"

The money vanished. "Swell guy," rang in Dyke's brain—and only a few hours ago he'd rated this antediluvian egg a lady. An interesting lady!

In a brand new way, she still was.

MRS. VAN WYE had her talents, however. Being a white woman and versed in the local jargon, she ran the gamut of tongues from English to Spanish to Auraucanian and backwards into pidgin Spanish of sorts. In the end she revealed to Dyke that his one way to the Andes mine must be by empty ore train like a stray chunk of ore. And the train's crew did not welcome his coming along at all.

But positively he had to go. At length he cast everything on one throw; he paid the trainman his last and only tenspot. It drew a grin and an upward jerk of the thumb. Dyke climbed aboard.

Up off the coast the train plodded. Ore dust flew in choking clouds, the whole train clattered and the noise reverberated all the way upland.

On the first height came fog. It hung in a pall for slamming, banging miles. Then night and relief over cool, parched wastes dotted sparsely with mud-walled, sprawling haciendas. It must have been deadly silent up there on that bald expanse, but the thundering, hollow-carred train boomed its deafening desecration upon this vast roof of the antipodal world.

Eventually came a huddle of adobe walls in the distance. It may have been mid-evening. And far beyond rose an ominous, jagged skyline, the desolate Cordillera. The first sight of its outline upon the indigo sky cast a gloom upon Dyke, a gloom that penetrated the dust caked all over him—

and the space in his billfold where money was no more.

The huddle grew to a town; Sierra Valho had arrived beneath the stars and the eternal frown of those Andes beyond. The train screeched to a stop for water and in the respite it gave, Dyke realized that his nostrils stung. His sunburned face smarted and puffed, but Sierra Valho added insult to these injuries in the form of acrid fumes. He leaped off the train in his curiosity and soon learned that Valho was steeped in alpaca manure. He was in the alpaca country and there was no escape from the ammoniacal smells.

Half an hour of this, then away again. The open cars roared out of night, into dawn. The eastern skyline towered higher than ever in shafts of slanting light. Bald crowns crimsoned and wild, ragged slopes purpled. Finally the sun leaped into view. Dyke hoped he'd remember that weird phenomenon, hoped fervently he would not be detained overlong in the barren desolation where it occurred.

THAT day he ate in the caboose, but his eating was mechanical by now. What was food—or hours or days away up here on a wilderness? How soon would he reach the mine? He listened to the talk among the crew and gathered bits of information; the great inland valley was out ahead.

It came quickly. The train skirted its upper end. More huts, more sprawling haciendas. Cattle in thousands and horses in sleek droves on huge ranches; peons on horseback, inquilinos barefoot with wicked knives. Lombardy poplars and immense cartwheels and spike-length rowels at vicious looking heels . . . the whole gamut of relentless change registered in a jumble of impressions upon Alonzo Dyke whose impatience to get to the mine mounted apace.

Restlessness seized him. He crawled from car to car until he stood across from the engineer in the engine cab. Darkness came down until the time came when the fire door opened and blazed a red streak along walls of rock fleeing close at either side. The train was inside a gorge—suddenly it went down, away down deep in precipitous descent.

The gorge ended abruptly and stars flickered coldly over all. Dyke craned his neck out the window, peered ahead and gasped. A deep valley lay almost under him. A mining town stood close against a big mountain. It was swathed in smoke. And great klieg lights turned night into day—where the arteries of activity never rested.

His trained eye followed the light path made by one of those kliegs among smoke clouds toward the mountainside. At its end he saw a black hollow; was that one of the mine adits? Away up there? Had they ladders or man-engines in that mine for the men? His eyes roved along the side, then up to where more openings appeared on barren rock.

"Ho!" he exclaimed. "The shafts run up instead of down . . . gravity drainage. Mining above, dropping production to the valley level. No beefing kibbles here—and there's a day-level. It's down at the base! Whole blooming operation upside down."

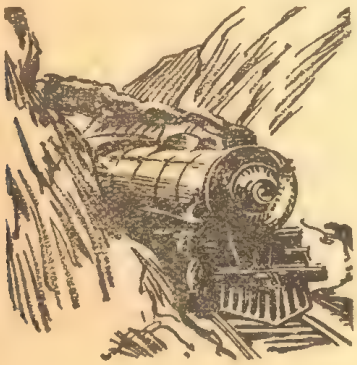
HE BARELY spotted the long, new building and identified it from his uncle's description as the new radium unit when the earth dropped out from under the locomotive. Brakes squealed beneath his wavering feet, away back the entire length of the train they cried in strident chorus. The whole moving uproar dived downward. A living gale of wind screamed past the engine cab.

"Easy, now, e-easy, ol' gal!" the engineer shouted, eyeing his jittering gauges.

Abruptly came a hairpin turn. The night world reversed, the valley flew around to his left. On sped the empty train just the furious same, a complaining mass of jostling steel. Dyke clung to the window while all outside it gyrated and earthquaked above it as though an uphea-

val had caught it in its maw. Another curve that tilted the engine up sideways. The hot smells of brakes, then another pitch downward into the void.

Finally a breathless race on the level valley floor. Straight for the mining colony that engine led its wolves of steel as though countless miles lay ahead. Suddenly came three full octaves of grinding screech. Every last brake gripped tight.



Twenty yards, a hundred . . . at the end came a terrific jolt that tossed Dyke head first for the fire door.

The stoker seized him en route, set him roughly onto his feet and the mad, speeding world came to an instantaneous halt. In the blasting silence that followed, Dyke heard the fireman grunt, "You'll do, you're okay. New buildin's over there. Chief's office is in it. He'll be in while we're checkin' in, better go direct."

Dyke thanked him and dropped to the ground.

So this was the Andes mine!

LON GOT relief in the stretch of his legs. To himself in the besooted darkness he smiled. It wasn't at all the entrance he had planned; he, the nephew and representative of the senior member of Keystone Haematite who stood at the head of all this. Arriving dirty, unshaven, on an ore train, without baggage and penniless. Ah well, mining was rough, too; he hoped Hargreave proved a good sport about it. Above all, he didn't fancy any joking tonight. Certainly not tonight. Heck of a way to put in his appearance.

On the other hand, it was an advantage. Fate had unwittingly disguised him thus. What stranger hereabouts would even suspect that he was Ben Dyke's nephew? Or that he was going to take out the next radium shipment? Ben Dyke needn't have worried so much, needn't have warned him, either, to hide his identity. Fate had done it perfectly.

He plodded stiffly past rough shacks, long barracks, a store here and there, even a high-stool lunch. At length the long lab. spread to left and right directly before him.

He discerned two young fellows and a door at their backs. Were they loafers? Not in this community; they looked more like guards. In fact he saw them stiffen at his approach.

"Mr. Hargreave inside?" he asked.

One spoke something unintelligible, but he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Dyke passed between them. When he did, a chill rode his spine as he heard their feet; they were following him in. He affected unconcern, however, and proceeded across the end of the long laboratory until, at this same end, he discovered a light. He went on, still aware of those two fellows padding at his heels.

THEN came an open door. Beyond it a man behind a desk, doing something with a test tube at a flame. He swung around to watch, from behind a thicket of brows, three men enter his office. Dyke would have recognized him in tophet; that heavy, immovable build and stance, above all, those Airedale brows. It was Waldo Hargreave, of course, chief of operations down here. But the brows were baffling. They hid his eyes, and what on earth can any man learn of another whose eyes are concealed?

But Dyke was not kept in doubt. Before he could reach the desk, the thin mouth below the eyebrows snapped out something in an unfamiliar tongue. One of the fellows behind Dyke replied in kind. In that strange moment, Dyke realized again how

unpresentable he must look; it was time he broke in on the talk.

"Well, Mr. Hargreave, I seem to have arrived with a guard of honor." He realized he spoke testily, so added, "Of course I realize you weren't expecting me just now, nor in this dirty condition, but—you know who I am?"

For the first time Dyke got a glimpse of Hargreave's eyes through the thatch—because they were boring straight into him. Cold, forbidding steel! "Yes, I know who you are. I was expecting you." The words came like sleet.

Dyke knew now how this man must feel; he was obviously piqued. Because I missed that special car he took the trouble to send all the way out to San Rey for me. I'm an irresponsible pup right now, I am; better court his good will pronto or my stay here'll be anything but pleasant.

So Dyke tactfully resumed with: "I'll tell you just what did happen, Hargreave, if you'll send these two fellows out. Maybe they savvy English and maybe they don't, but I'll feel easier to have them out of the way. I——"

"They are staying," Hargreave growled. "As for your story, you needn't tell it. Alonzo Dyke is not dead, as you thought. He arrived yesterday."

II

BEWILDERMENT threatened Alonzo Dyke. Had he heard aright or was he dreaming? Were those really eyes under the thatch or polished steel points—was there a Hargreave anyway? Even the slam of mine cars outside, did cars clatter in these frowning Andes fastnesses at all? And this apparition behind the desk avowed that he, Dyke, was not dead. He had arrived yesterday!

Presently Dyke found himself saying, "But man alive, I simply couldn't have arrived yesterday. I just blew in, tonight. I——"

Hargreave merely addressed the two at Dyke's heels. Instantly they sprang at him. Four hands seized him before he could turn. But he put up a battle, only to discover amazing strength and an Indian's agility in men he has suspected to be loafers. And once they had him helpless in their grips, they made motions that plainly said, "Out of here. Move!"

"Confound you, Hargreave," Dyke panted, planting stubborn feet, "this has gone too far. If somebody else claims he's Alonzo Dyke, he's a liar. But if this is a practical joke, mister, you'll rue your cheap wit before I get done with you. The idea, treating me——"

Something knocked Dyke's head over onto his shoulder. The office floated recklessly. Weakness poured down through him and he was being dragged out of the light. A few yards like this and he was hauled around a corner of that room built in the end of the lab'. One of the two bounders opened the door at its far end. Dyke was shoved headlong through the doorway into a pitch dark void. Locks clicked behind him.

For the second time since leaving the Panama Canal, Dyke found himself locked in strange quarters. This time he had his senses. By degrees he got to thinking, and he had plenty of material for it. As a first trip below the equator, this was indeed a hummer. With that for a starter, his mind moved on toward the more practical considerations—and came to one startling conclusion: somebody was posing as Alonzo Dyke out here in the Andes.

Eventually came a second idea. It roused him to speech when its full import hit him. "Is that Hargreave really deceived by the imposter impersonating me, or is he in cahoots with the rascal? By Judas, Hargreave might be the brains of the entire radium steal! Easiest thing in the world for him to hand over the radium to a trumped-up Alonzo Dyke while he had the real Dyke under lock and key—and if old Ben somehow caught onto the scheme, all Hargreave had to say was, 'How'd I know? I never saw your nephew before.'"

DYKE got to his feet and paced his cramped quarters; this was the worst predicament yet. Perhaps Heidel had been wiser than either Dyke had realized. This trip south was no simple mission after all.

Let's see. In code, the Philadelphia office had apprized Hargreave, their chief of operations down here, of their plan to move the second lot of radium out on the person of him, Alonzo Dyke. Of course; and Hargreave may have cabled in code to send Dyke incognito—so that he could lock him up, out of the way, and plant a confrere in his stead, some rat who'd take out the radium and whisk it away for Hargreave. Certainly nobody in the Andes knew Alonzo Dyke on sight. In truth, hadn't he inadvertently—or otherwise—furthered just such a scheme by slinking in on a train, dirty, bewhiskered and . . .

Dyke comprehended now, how completely he was at the mercy of Hargreave. Aye, and that beetle-browed enigma was king here. If it suited the king's purpose, the real Dyke could vanish forever and no one be the wiser until too late.

The time had come to clutch at straws. The only straw, however, worth considering was his credentials, that letter of introduction from old Ben himself. Should he show it to Hargreave and risk losing thus his sole means of identification if the chief was indeed crooked? Or should he try to show it to others? If others, just who—and how could he? This was a jail.

In the end, Dyke's suspicions led him to secrete that vital letter. In case he should be searched, it would not be taken from him. Immediately Dyke began to feel along the walls of his prison.

That was the time he blundered onto the light switch. A small button sunk into the wall. As he pressed it, light flooded the place. Lon blinked all around on plasterboard walls and ceiling. Twelve feet long, this room, and nine wide. Must have served as an office, for there was a small, knocked-together desk, one chair. Over on that other long side stood a couch—yes, and two low chairs he'd overlooked.

The fingers that removed the folded letter from the billfold handled it more cautiously than money. Somehow the crisp feel of that sheet of importance jogged Dyke's courage. He could imagine doughty old Ben himself right now at his very elbow. Dyke believed his spirit, at least, was there. Old Ben, expecting him to come through with the radium . . . come through he absolutely must!

Pinching the folded sheet, he put away his empty billfold and murmured, "I know most of this by heart; 'Keep Alonzo's relation to me quiet. Permit him to look around freely . . .' Huh, freely!"

He unfolded it and spread it on the desk. A cry of sheer amazement—the sheet of paper was absolutely blank!

VAN WYE! Why hadn't he realized it long ago? That crook had stolen his letter on the boat—and his baggage loaded with not only his clothing but a lot of other little means of identification which a man inevitably takes along on a trip. Armed with that information, plus what Mrs. Van Wye had gathered from him by their conversations on deck, the wily Van Wye had doped Dyke, left him aboard ship in a room nobody would suspect, and gone ashore to the special car as Alonzo Dyke. Of course!

And although Hargreave was expecting Ben's nephew, as per cable, he had never laid eyes on the man before. So in blows the brazen Van Wye, presents old Ben's letter, and is accepted.

"Ay-ah, but wait a minute," Dyke mused. "What did Hargreave mean by saying, 'Yes I know you. I was expecting you?' Now did that buzzard really know who I was? Was he really expecting me?

"If he did, he's the arch crook we want. Two to one he did plant Van Wye aboard the boat—to make everything come out exactly as it did."

Neither day nor night counted in that room. Time flowed by, a river of suspended existence. Outside, a large mine poured raw hematite from the bowels of a grim Andes mountain, tiny cars moved

it to a siding. Another, slower project moved its laggard tons from a newer lode to the laboratory-refinery where radium was extracted from it in priceless driblets. Outside, wind whistled down the upland valley and machinery rumbled. But all this was outside; the room that circumscribed Lon Dyke's existence was soundproof, probably the creation of some harassed official, some man who did thinking in silence. It was a beehive set down in the midst of chemicals and apparatus, a tomb in the heart of a secret process.

Lon Dyke bethought him of his watch rather late; it said seven o'clock when a key turned in his lock, the ingenious bar of metal that stood between life and existence for him. He sprang around fiercely to face that door, prepared to deal with the next abuse.

A swarthy fellow suspiciously like one of those guards flung open the heavy door. He stepped aside with the silent economy of a feline. Then a tray of food appeared,

and a young man behind it who pushed it in ahead of him awkwardly. The guard followed with an air of conscious strength.

"This man is going to look you over," the young fellow explained tersely in cultivated tones. "Can't take any chances."

"Look me over?" Lon repeated.

"Right. Keep your hands away from your body—just in case you're sporting a gun or a knife, mister."

Dyke relaxed. He locked his hands at the back of his head and smiled as the search proceeded.

The guard worked swiftly and stepped away. He grunted his disappointment at the trifles he had turned out of Dyke's pockets; what brand of fool was this? A crook without a knife or gun!

DYKE relished his bafflement. "Not much to find on a terrible desperado, eh?" he asked half tauntingly. "Let's see, you get one handkerchief, one empty billfold and a pipe—oh yes, and my tobacco. Here, you overlooked this card of paper matches in the shirt pocket. Better take it, chief friskum, I might burn this joint down just to get out of it."

The taunt drew no reply, but at a low mumble from the white man the guard padded out with the pickings. The white fellow then slumped moodily to the couch. Dyke needed no call to that meal.

At length he smacked his lips. "Real American breakfast in the heart of the wilderness," he remarked. "It must be morning again outside."

"Huh," was the sole reply it drew.

Dyke studied him covertly while eating; probably in mid-twenties, slight but wiry, absolutely American. Pretty sore about something and an extrovert trying hard to be an introvert, as the psych's say it—the fellow had a tongue.

"Wet nurse to a prisoner," Dyke remarked between mouthfuls. "Don't fancy wet nursing, eh?"

The young man flashed a glance, bit his lip and shifted his feet. But that was not enough, for he grunted, "Me a nurse!"

"Maybe you know why I'm penned up in here."

"Know a-all about it."

Dyke evinced a flattering surprise. "Well! Then you know a damsite more than I——"

"Cut the gab and eat, I'm not wasting my morning in social calls."

"In other words, no talking with prisoner. Okay." Dyke finished the meal in silence, but he did some fast thinking. Here sat a disgruntled man; why disgruntled? Certainly not merely because he'd been delegated to feed the prisoner, that would be picayune, and the fellow

didn't look the part. No, more likely he was some cub engineer, some student getting in mining experience between semesters—and waiting on a prisoner wasn't the sort of experience he'd come for. Or he might be just plain homesick.

Dyke tried the homesick hunch as the more likely to click. He cleared his throat to ask dreamily, "Wouldn't it be marvelous to wake up back in the good old States this morning? Say, fighting for a strap in an uptown ell or——"

THE FLINT struck sparks. It exceeded his fondest hopes. It must have hit tinder for the words came flaming hot; they must have been accumulating for a long time. Aye, Dyke had guessed rightly, the man was a hundred and ten per cent homesick. He was heartsore to be out of this barren, windswept loneliness and back home. Experience, that was the one handcuff against his immediate return, Broad Street and his Pennsylvania hills. He was a future mining engineer—for some mine between the Gulf and Canada, not here. But instead of mining practice, Hargreave had sidetracked him, had allotted him unrelated, menial jobs. The one he harped on most was that of showing a man Dyke around. Now he fed a prisoner. Mining practice!

Even the man Dyke out there had disappointed him; Dyke whose coming he had eagerly anticipated, some one young like himself, fresh from the States and all it would mean to his loneliness. But Dyke had not talked of the States—nor of anything else; he was not sociable, never once had he loosened up. Indeed, he hadn't even shown an interest in this remarkable mining project at all!

"By the way, what did you say your name was?" Lon asked when the flood of words slowed.

"Name? Mellowe."

"Now, Mellowe, did it ever strike you that for a mining engineer your Dyke doesn't even know mining?"

"Mining? With those hands? He's no engineer. Where'd you get that notion about Dyke?"

Lon smiled engagingly to aver, "Alonzo Dyke is a mining engineer. Positively he is."

The two men stared at each other—until Mellowe laughed shortly. "They warned me you'd prove a slick talker, also to leave you alone," he remarked indifferently. Thereupon he rose and stretched as a man will when his day promises no enthusiasm.

"Sit right where you are," he ordered. "Hand me that tray at arm's length and no funny business."

"Okay, mister, but bring me a razor and some magazines, next visit, to take up my everlasting time here."

"Maga—hell! Where'd you think you are? New York or Philly? Magazines!" He went out gloomily.

NOON brought back a non-committal Mellowe. No, he did not know or care a damn what Hargreave was up to; nobody knew—yet. Probably he'd turn the prisoner loose in a week or so.

"That means," Dyke ventured, "after the radium has been shipped?"

"So you admit you do know about the radium."

"Admit! Mellowe, I came after it."

"My, but you're frank."

"I'm Alonzo Dyke. I'm the man old Ben Dyke sent down here for that second lot of radium. How on earth I'll prove it I don't know, but if I can't you folks are letting a crack thief walk off with it. Hargreave'll have a heap of explaining to do when the stuff fails to reach Philadelphia and——"

"Sez you." It was a sneer.

"Sez I. Kee-rect," Dyke repeated firmly. "Mellowe, you and I are engineers, and engineers, with all their faults, are nobody's fools. You've got to listen—no, I'm not going to ask you to let me out of here, but do please give me one break: Help me prove that I am the real Alonzo Dyke. Why, man alive, Hargreave is be-

ing taken in by a crook; either that or he's in on the steal. You, yourself, must have heard about the loss of the other shipment, what?"

Mellowe nodded guardedly.

"Certainly. And you must have been here at the time, so you saw a Mr. Heidel. Now let me describe Heidel." Lon gave him an intimate description and concluded with, "You see? I know Heidel, have seen him around the main office. All right. Now go try this one on your man Dyke: see if he can describe Heidel to you. While you're about it, try to trip him on his engineering terms. That's all I ask of you now."

"All you ask; and for what purpose?"

"I'm showing you that your Dyke is not Dyke at all, he's an impostor. Well, what do you say?"

Mellowe left without another word.

But he came in that night wearing a wry grin. It was friendly. He locked the door behind him after setting the supper on the desk.

"There sure is something odd about that Dyke," he launched forth. "You see, I asked him why Heidel limps in his left leg and he says, 'I have been told it is from a wound in the war.' "

Mellowe stopped to laugh—"If Heidel's lame, I'm a Harvard professor!"

DYKE was elated. "Heidel lame. Imagine Heidel, the flying and fishing enthusiast lame—oh, did you try him on engineering?"

"We-ell, he sidestepped me there, but that bird's no engineer." Mellowe caught himself up at this point to remind: "Listen, you, while this stuff breaks my monotony, I'm not down here in the Andes to sleuth. I'm not taking your side, understand, just curious. By the way, stranger, what's your story?"

"My story." Dyke welcomed the opportunity, he withheld nothing. And at the end of his recital he asked, "And, since you've heard my side of the case, what is the other fellow's side?"

Mellowe hesitated. "Er . . . hum . . . hell, it can do no damage to spill it to you, you sure can't get out of here. You see it's this way. Hargreave got word the younger Dyke was coming on a certain boat. He sent out that special car and it brought back Dyke on the tail-end of an empty ore train, as expected. Dyke produced his credentials, a letter, when Hargreave asked for them; that was okay per instructions from the home office, I take it.

"But Dyke did more, he reported his suspicions of a fellow who had nosed into his business and it soon developed that the fellow knew about this radium development here. He explained that his suspicions were aroused by the way the stranger acted when he dropped his letter one day—that letter from Ben Dyke, I take it. He was sure, he claims, that that man read at least part of it; so he hid the letter and put a blank sheet of paper in its place, see?

"Then, the night before he landed, that stranger knocked him cold and locked him into a vacant stateroom; he thinks the guy figured he'd killed him. Anyway, a steward discovered him in time to help him ashore at San Rey. So of course he warned Hargreave to watch for a stranger who might blow in here and claim to be Dyke. You see, the rough guy, thinking he'd conked Dyke, would attempt to come along in his stead to grab off the radium. Get it?"

"Yeah," Lon replied thoughtfully, "and that's what Hargreave meant by saying he had been expecting me. At that, I can't blame Hargreave—nevertheless, Mellowe, I am Alonzo Dyke and prove it I absolutely must before this lot of radium is ready to leave. Say, Mellowe, can't you help me prove my identity?"

"Me? Listen, if Hargreave ever got wind of what we've said in here I'd lose my job and my credits for mine experience."

"By the time Hargreave does hear about it, mister, he'll be so completely floored with the company he'll be damned glad to hold his tongue. Mellowe, I've been think-

ing; there's one person who could identify both your man Dyke and myself. She's that woman down in San Rey."

"You mean Mrs. Van——"

"Wye She's aching to put the hooks into him for walking out on her there. Yeah. Get a message to her, will you? Ask her to come up here, she's friendly enough to me, helped me get my ride in on the ore train. Tell her Van Wye didn't take the boat out at all, he's here. Believe me, she'll come. She'll be so mad she'll blow the whole story right before Hargreave."

A SLOW smile grew on Mellowe's long face. "I never did fancy that Dyke bird anyway," he mused.

"But he isn't Dyke."

"All right, all right, have it your way—Dyke." Impulsively he reached out his hand. "This promises to be good, shake on it!"

They shook; and for the first time since leaving the ship, he foresaw the end to one setback after another. He stretched his long length onto the couch and passed promptly into the realms of oblivion.

He was still asleep when Mellowe entered with breakfast. It was a new Mellowe, alert and grinning, a Mellowe infected with the thrill of a prospective show to cut across the monotony, and the spur of success in his latest errand. He had sent the call for the woman in the case to San Rey by a trainman.

"For the love of decency, man, wake up . . . here, roll over, sit up. Listen, sleepyhead. I've called the dame, told her Van Wye's up here with another woman. That'll get her! I told her to look up Dyke the minute she blows in, too."

Lon hugged his sleepy knees, he absorbed the report until it grew upon his reviving faculties. At length he chuckled. "How I should like to see his face when she confronts him—and hear him try to clear himself with Hargreave. Hargreave, the bedevilled chief of operations. Rather looks as though he was in for a tight jam; d'you know, I begin to pity that human airdale, Mellowe. Just between us two, I'm not going to say anything about all this in the home office, no need of rubbing it into him, his mistake has been perfectly natural."

"Natural!"

"We-ell, call it caution, then; a heavy, artless engineer attempts caution against crime in the wilderness. Tell me, how long before that woman arrives?"

"Oh, two, three, four days. Maybe five. Better eat now." Dyke tried his coffee—"What I wouldn't give just to see that pair face Hargreave! Can't manage it, can you?"

Mellowe had been conjuring such a plan for hours without success. "No, I cannot, but there's plenty of time yet, I'll figure it out. Maybe."

THAT began Dyke's initial day of sheer, physical resentment. Sound sleep had sprouted his usual vigor, he wanted action, exercise in the open, clean air and sun. These cramped quarters pressed in upon him, irked his sense of distance and speed. Long before the night meal arrived, he was a caged animal.

Mellowe read it in his tense activity, his restless impatience—and Mellowe grinned. For he drew from his clothing a well-oiled eggbeater drill. Three fine drills came. He hid them in the bedding while Dyke looked on and a dozen impulses flooded his brain. Yes, there had been a time when he would have used such tools to escape.

Mellowe must have glimpsed his thoughts for he warned, "Don't misunderstand me, it'll do you no good to drill your way out of here."

"I know, this Andes wilderness is a jail in itself, I realize that, but why the tools?"

Mellowe went to the end wall, selected a spot four and a half feet above the floor and explained, "Bore a circle of holes right here. Lift away the disc you make and remove the sound-proofing at the other side; it's alpaca wool. Then, after midnight, bore another disc out of the outer

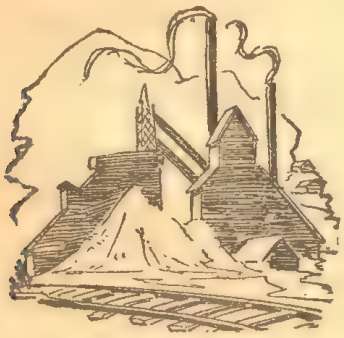
wall. When you remove it, your peekhole will be directly behind a shelf, see, and not noticeable from the outside. But you'll hear what goes on out there and maybe see things if bottles or glassware don't happen to stand in your way.

"That peekhole will be your ringside seat to the big show. I shall meet the woman myself and bring her directly to Hargreave in his office when the night empty gets in from the coast. Somehow I'll have to get Van Wye in too. Then the grand showdown. Man, you don't realize what a Godsend it'll be in this humdrum of ore cars, wind, dust, kliegs——"

"Three drill points for just that?" Dyke asked.

"Huh, this is no ordinary wooden hoosegow, it's made of a ground rock stuff that doesn't absorb or transmit sounds, they built it for one of the brains that invented that radium process. You'll dull all three, don't waste 'em."

LATE that night Dyke saw for himself what Mellowe had explained. He resorted to soap from the washstand to grease the drills and even then they dulled quickly. He bored a four-inch circle out of the inner wall, removed quantities of alpaca and



bored a smaller, less obvious circle in the outer wall. This he removed carefully and caught it before it fell outward.

And heard at last the distant clank and rumble of the night's activity outside the lab. He was in touch with life once again, remote though it might be. He could reach two fingers through the holes and touch glass; that curved smoothness would be a reagent bottle. In time, with his jail in darkness, he took advantage of faint, indirect lights from kliegs high outside the building to make out silhouettes of laboratory equipment. And here stood Hargreave's office directly in front of him. Indeed it was a ringside lookout and somewhere within his range of vision must be a bit of white crystals about ready to go—to be stolen while he, within a few yards, stood helpless to prevent it. Mellowe's tools had provided a chance to watch the identification of an impostor, if and whenever the woman should arrive; they had also made Lon Dyke more impatient, more furious than ever.

Dyke stood at that small aperture for hours, first on one foot, then on the other while his thoughts raced. His breathing moistened the rough edges of the inner circle, his eyes dwelt on the outlines of generators and belting and shielded equipment over which his enthusiastic uncle had spent his best efforts. He smelled the old familiar odors of chemicals and felt the tingle of mine dust in his nostrils . . . while he wondered, "What if the woman did not come?"

Toward morning he replaced both discs so that they could be quickly removed without sound, and early in the morning Mellowe rearranged those seldom used reagent bottles outside on the shelf so that they'd conceal the hole somewhat without spoiling the visibility.

Impatience and misgivings ruled that entire day for Lon Dyke. Who would have dreamed, two months ago, that he'd land in this predicament below the equator on the ridgepole of South America? It did seem as though the Dykes always met with their worst mishaps at the outset of their attempts in life. His father had discovered deadly gas in a mine shaft at an early date and saved fifteen miners from suffocation, but they moved that Dyke to an emergency hospital and saved him only by hours of persistent work. Old Uncle Ben had started his career by losing two fingers in an explosion that, by all indications, should

have closed his career. Now another Dyke stood on the threshold of a career, this one with good lungs and all ten fingers, but with the fate of the entire Dyke interests on his shoulders and as helpless as a babe to affect the denouement. Two Dykes had weathered their early fates, would the third fail?

Lon Dyke walked in his socks, he pictured Mrs. Van Wye at sea, back in the States, down the South American coast in a pleasanter town than San Rey. He saw the trainman losing Mellowe's note, saw him clutching the note and asking in vain for a Van Wye woman—or having found her, getting nothing for his pains but that hard laugh of hers.

MEANTIME this Van Wye slick-aleck would slip away with the loot before he, the real Dyke, had time to identify himself to an engineer with no wit and a closed mind. After days in this cell, Dyke was no better off, Hargreave still had to be penetrated with the truth and the fate of old Ben and his Keystone Haematite hung by the thread.

That night brought no relief. Away into another day he fretted and paced holes in his socks and rags on the edges of his nerves. When would that woman come?

Through the round holes he watched men in the radium process. He studied Hargreave when he came into his office for reports. Everything was tense out there, the stuff was about ready to leave—where? Dyke tried to catch conversations and failed in the hum of the motors. He watched Hargreave's hairy visage for signs and saw only seams stitched with neglected beard, drooped brows that concealed cautious eyes. Yet, a new tenseness showed on that face, and men were reporting increasingly often. Production sheets were handy for constant checking and hurry was the keynote.

Then the crowd cleared out again. This time, all lights were not switched off, one was left on, indicating that the place must be visible from the outside against prowlers. The man in the jail understood—and his door opened softly. "Sh. The dame's due, but the train hasn't come in." It was Mellowe.

"Rats!"

MELLOWE vanished as quickly as he had come, and Dyke sank to the couch.

Hours later he sat bolt upright.

" . . . morning," Mellowe was saying. "The train got in about daybreak with a hotbox burned to the devil—no, I haven't your breakfast, but you be ready, the woman came!"

"She—she's really here?" Dyke couldn't believe his ears.

"You'll think so. Be ready at the lookout you made, I'm about to stage my show in Hargreave's office. Got to round him up and knuckle onto that Van Wye. Then the inevitable woman in the triangle. I'm busy as hell." He hurried away in high spirits.

Dyke caught considerable of his fervor, he was leaving jail in an hour. Maybe minutes! Then leaving the Andes with the radium. What would become of that Van Wye now? Hargreave was the law out here, would he let him go or turn him in?

Suddenly the door opened again: "Never mind the lookout, come on outside. Half the town is out there gaping at that femme and does she like it! She's with Van Wye and Hargreave out front. Come on quick, this is on me!"

Dyke was blinded by his first sunshine in eons. He almost fell off the doorstep at the lab' entrance. He heard the rustle and undertones of an expectant crowd; indeed it was an audience. A strange woman away off here in stylish clothes, a beautiful woman who needed no press agent anywhere. She had them all agape for a sensation.

They got it. Just as Mellowe half guided, half pulled, Dyke into view, the woman turned and saw them. She gave a little startled cry, rushed to them and threw her arms around Dyke's neck.

Alonzo Dyke was utterly flabbergasted.

He tried to push her away, but she clung with surprising strength and determination.

"Don't be angry, George," she whimpered in a stagey voice, "I just had to come to you. When I didn't get a word, not one word from you, I knew it had gone wrong. I was afraid of it, George," she wailed on, "you know how I did my best to talk you out of it, but you wouldn't listen to me . . . "

III

ONCE again Alonzo Dyke reclaimed consciousness in a drumming skull. He resented the hands clawing at his back, shaking him.

"Out of here, leave me alone," he growled, "or I'll bust your—oh. Sorry, Mellowe . . . what happened?" He added, as more of his memory came back, "Where's that blasted Van Wye?"

Now he leaped off the couch in renewed wrath, but his head spun to the exertion and sent him down with groping hands and, "Ye gods, what a mess!"

"Take it easy, mister, you're back in the hoosegow tighter'n ever, that's no dream; but save your strength." Mellowe talked slowly, gently to quiet him.

"Strength for what? Strength!" Dyke barked.

"Things didn't break at all . . . at all."

"I take it you're convinced, by now, that you took the wrong side in this radium affair. Come on, out with it."

MELLOWE considered the challenge in that deliberate way he had assumed. When at last he did speak, it came more in the nature of oral thinking than conversation. "Ten to one I'm a dumb fool, but I know somehow that Van Wye is not genuine and I sure hate that Hargreave and—well, there's nothing for me to tie to but the wild idea—" he glanced up—"that you are Ben Dyke's nephew. You see, that woman made a bee line for Van Wye, as you call him, direct from the train. They had quite some confab, those two. 'Twasn't any love feast, not when I ran into it, but that's one clever female, they probably patched up their row so's not to wreck their scheme."

"What in hell happened to me?" Dyke demanded.

"Plenty. You made a pass at Van Wye and Hargreave knocked you for a score—from behind."

"It would be, from that stupid, corn-fed wretch!"

"Not so corn-fed, he's turned on me for leading you out onto the scene. Oh, I told him the woman asked to see you——"

"Yeah. Any more glad tidings when I pet this lump behind my right ear?"

"Sure. Signs in the lab' indicate the the radium is ready. They've made the lead cell it goes in, and the box is on the chief's desk waiting for it. Forty-eight hours, that's my guess."

"And even if I got my fists onto the stuff, there's nothing I can do about it. Why, this wilderness is the best jail on earth."

"You mean the valley. Yup, and the only way out is the rails."

"I suppose a man afoot would die of exhaustion."

"Or thirst," Mellowe added. "You'd have to sprout wings to reach human habitation alive. Y' know, they did try out a plane here once, but it was purgatory landing and hell making altitude enough to get over these peaks all around us. At present and hereafter, trains rule, they're the sole means in and out." He cocked his head, smiled at the phrases he had just turned, and enquired, "Were you entertaining ideas of deserting us, mister?"

"Somehow that swindle's got to be smashed," Dyke replied soberly. "Mellowe, it's been my purpose from the start to settle this radium situation without calling on old Ben. Since our little drama out front, however . . . well, I have to admit that saving the radium is more important than my ego. So Ben Dyke in Philadelphia must be warned."

"How?"

"By cable."

"No cable here, of course. Everything goes out from the radio; that's how we know there still is an outer world, you know."

"Mellowe, you're going to wireless Ben Dyke for me."

Mellowe stiffened. "Not on your life. You may be right as hell, but I'm washed up. Imagine me walking into that crowd at the shack and ordering a message sent to the owner, warning him. You're crazy!"

"I see. Is that shack open all the time?"

"Closes at eight P. M., opens at——"

"Never mind when it opens, listen to me. You're letting me out of here long enough to get off a radio message to some station ashore or afloat. I can send, b'lieve me, and——"

"Nothing doing—say, which do I look like to you, a pecan?"

"Be serious, man, an old man's work of years, his life depends on the receipt of this ten thousand dollars' worth of radium."

"Eighteen thousand," Mellowe corrected him, "they've pepped up the process lately."

"My Lord, all the more reason to warn Ben."

Mellowe stood adamant beneath that silly exterior. He would have departed thus had not Dyke realized that further pleas were hopeless. Utterly cornered, therefore, he stepped up to Mellowe and held his chin where he had to look into a blazing, determined pair of eyes. "Mellowe, either you let me out for a quarter hour to radio the head of Keystone Haematite or I make a complete wreck of the inside of this jail. Damn it, I'll——"

"Wait, wait! Let me think, it isn't so simple. There are armed guards outside the lab' entrance. I'll talk later!" And with that, Mellowe left the jail, an astonished young warden.

LATE the following afternoon Van Wye joined Hargreave in his office. Plainly it had been prearranged. Dyke watched the man who had bested him on the boat and only yesterday escaped his fist. He eyed the narrow orbs squinting down that long, thin nose and discovered two Van Wyes; for the left side of his face was different from the right. In the expression of the one lurked craftiness that seemed to run into timidity at times; the other side was twisted into a built-up sort of courage, and cruelty never left it. Yes, that blond thatch was the same he'd seen on the boat, but never had Van Wye appeared with the woman. Clever pair.

But Hargreave was talking in stentorian tones. Dyke set his ear closer to the holes: " . . . remember, lost it when the train robbers caught the ore train crawling up a nine percent where it was crooked. Several such places out there. That train was guarded, understand, but it happened. Might happen again. They might even wreck the train; for radium is not only more valuable than gold, but there isn't much of it."

"You—er, keep shipments secret," Van Wye reminded him.

"Try to. That first shipment was supposed to be going that way and this one the same. But this one leaves under your uncle's detailed specifications; that is, you know, one train goes under heavy guard with what will look like the radium in the oak box lined with thick lead. Next day or so, on the next train out, you go with the radium that is radium. I—er—seems to me it is a risky way, but those are Ben Dyke's orders; he seems to have much faith in your delivering the stuff to him."

Behind the round holes in the jail walls, a face burned. Faith. How miserably he, Ben's nephew, had warranted that old man's trust in him.

PRESENTLY Hargreave reached for a strong, oak box about ten inches long by five square. He pointed to a chunk of lead close by. This he slid over the desk to the box and fitted it inside snugly. Next he showed that the lead was halved and fitted by alternating ridges and grooves: "You see? Nobody exposes himself to radium; lead is the only ordinary

substance to put between yourself and eventual, certain death from its rays. Now here's the key to the box."

"Another box exactly like this goes ahead of me on one train," Van Wye repeated rather somberly.

"Yes. See these halves again! they are gouged out to make a small socket for a glass tube . . . of radium bromide. In the one that precedes you, however, the white powder will look like radium salt but will be sulfate of magnesium. I almost hope they do steal that one," Hargreave added with a chuckle. "Otherwise it will be delivered to the purser on the boat, just to keep up the bluff."

Then Dyke saw Hargreave write something on paper and shove it toward Van Wye, watching his open door the while. It was obvious at this stage of the meeting that Van Wye was growing nervous about the hazards of radium; he took the paper gingerly and read, "The combination of the safe directly behind me, do not look that way now, never can tell who may be watching us. And here's the key to the oak—we call it a 'casket' and by gosh I believe it is one!"

Van Wye shrank away. "What . . . I don't——"

"Oh you will! You'll get me. I tell you I'm afraid of radium poisoning, a man never knows when he's getting it and when he does know what ails him it is too late to save him. Horrible death, horrible! One thing to run an iron mine, quite another to monkey with radium ore; and ten damsites worse to refine it."

Van Wye rose to escape the vicinity of the lab', but Hargreave raised a staying hand.

"Not yet, mister, sit down. Here is a receipt for eighteen thousand dollars' worth of the rarest stuff in commerce. Sign it and from the moment you do, you are responsible for the stuff!"

"Me? Already? I haven't seen that radium!"

"Nor do you want to; it's in the safe rolled in layer upon layer of lead and waiting to go. No, you don't want to let those rays touch any part of you, certainly not your eyes! If you like, however, I can open the door a trifle to let you look——"

"No! I'll take your word. I—I——" Van Wye's hand shook as he read the $18,000 and signed for it. He passed it to the chief of operations.

"Done. I'm relieved immensely. And by the Jehovah it's only a streak of good luck that that cuss we've got in the jail over there didn't walk out with this instead of you. Talk about your clumsy schemers, why he didn't even come armed to get it!"

DYKE saw the receipt flutter in Hargreave's hands, but his thoughts were on that engineer's words; crazy schemer? What a lot he could be showing Hargreave right now if the man were reasonable!

"Speaking of your jailbird," Van Wye said, "reminds me, how about sending that woman back to the coast?"

Dyke detected the studied casualness he attempted.

"Hoh. Woman! She's due to remain here until the jailbird goes. That'll be some few days after you've had time to get safely beyond the both of them."

"You suspect her then?"

"Me? Oh no, but she can look after herself," Hargreave suggested. He added significantly, "That's final."

What a day—from the other side of the two holes in the walls! Dyke passed up his supper. Even Mellowe sat disconsolately glum to tilt with his own conscience. What if this man's contention was absolute truth, then he, Mellowe, was letting a crook walk out with the radium . . . just because he wasn't letting the man get to a radio shack out back. If only he could approach Hargreave and get his ear, but few ever ventured to approach that individual, fewer got his ear. Useless. Mellowe sighed and spoke gruffly. "Time you ate—no? Anyhow I'll leave it here; gotta go."

"Haven't forgotten something, have you?"

Mellowe slammed the door and came back. "Damn you, you would remember."

"Oh yes; naturally. What I want to know at present is, what about those two guards outside the door?"

"Yeah, what about them?"

"Listen to me, Mellowe; I shall——"

"Never mind the rest, be ready at midnight for—for something . . . "

Midnight and a jittery Mellowe. In he stole, pale and distraught; also jawing: "You realize what this does to me, big feller, if you're caught out. I'll be suspected the instant that radium is stolen—if it is."

Dyke went closer and rested both hands on his shoulders gently. "Yes, other big feller, I realize. I'll do nothing to make you further trouble, nothing. My efforts tonight are not to keep my own name clear in all this radium business, understand; I am doing this to save Ben Dyke from complete business annihilation. Already I have failed him, I fear; this is an eleventh hour move."

"Twelfth hour, mister, you stand corrected. Now about getting past those guards—you don't pass them."

"Where to, then?"

"This is the key to a door below the back of the lab'. Go out of this hoosegow and turn left. Follow the end wall back until you reach an opening at its far end—out there beyond Hargreave's office. Turn right into that opening and go down ten steps."

"Down?"

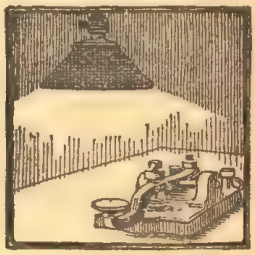
"Yes, the valley floor dips sharply right under the lab'. Now then; at the tenth step is a locked door. It is an emergency exit in case of fire or explosion in the lab'. This key is what Hargreave gave me the morning he assigned me to feed you and all that. Only Hargreave has a key to that door——"

"That's enough, Mellowe, I have a clear mental picture of the whole trip."

"Hurry, then, and for goshsake and graduation credits get back pronto. Go out of here crouching, those guards are outside."

DYKE went. The fire door at the foot of ten stairs rasped a trifle, but nobody showed up. He went on among posts that supported the east half of the lab'. He saw the shack under the smoky blur of reflected kliegs high overhead. In a few swift strides he was inside.

"Maybe I'm a fool to let this chance slip, I could get to the train and ride the rods to the coast. Mellowe? I'd radio Uncle Ben to fix that, but . . . but I gave that kid my word, so . . . " his hands pawed in the darkness toward the radio. One hand wiped down a fuse that was a grid leak, the other found the brass key.



Eventually he located the switch and yanked downward. The sound started, the pitch rose until he peered out the window, lest some curious goof catch him at all this venture.

Nobody outside—yet. He bent to the key and sent a message that had been made up in his mind hours ago:

"Keystone Haematite Andes mine calling. Urgent."

Three times he ran it off, then cut the power and waited with the squeamish feeling that someone was coming. As soon as the noise died to a low drone some one did come into the alley, but he glanced toward the shack and passed along.

Dyke sent that call three times, four. He was about to send it for the fifth time when the dots and dashes began to come in. Some station had picked it out of the ether! The station proved to be a ship on the coast.

"What is urgent in the Andes?" it asked.

"Plenty," Dyke replied. "Forward the following message to Benj. Dyke 9743 Blvd. Wimberly in Phila. Stop. Order second shipment delayed. Stop. Danger. Stop. Investigation urgent. Stop.

Signed: Lon D."

The ship's operator repeated it back to Dyke, railed him for clumsiness and lack of shortcuts, then promised to relay the call up over the equator and on to Philly. Dyke started back.

Outside the shack, however, stood a tall silhouette of a man. He waited there with a ring of keys in hand, swung them thoughtfully and listened. At length he came over to the shack and Dyke's blood tingled in his fists; this time there'd be no Hargreave to spoil his blow . . . but the watchman stopped at the corner of the shack, turned his key in a fire station, and resumed his way uphill.

"Phewey!" Dyke flew from that shack. He hurried through the darkness under the laboratory and reached the emergency door.

But it was unlocked. It was open! Positively he had left it locked, somebody had been through it since he came out. Was it Mellowe? No, he had Mellowe's key. Then Hargreave because Mellowe had distinctly said that only Hargreave had a key to this door.

Lon Dyke crawled up those ten stairs with his hands and feet—and his heart in his throat. Ten up, then along the end wall—but there was a light on in the lab'. At this hour! Dyke got inside the hoosegow and——

"Hargreave!" Mellowe whispered. "He talked so long with those guards outside I was sure he'd nipped you. Get your radio off?"

"To a ship at sea, fresh bird, but he'll relay it okay."

"I've got to get out of here, give me that key. If the radio flops on us we'll hatch up something else. So long."

"Wait. You saw Hargreave and the guards talking?"

"Yes."

"Hargreave entered by the front door?"

"Of course. You didn't leave yours open?"

"No, sir."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing, better hustle out."

NEVERTHELESS, in the ensuing silence Dyke wondered why he had found that fire exit open. Had Hargreave really used the front entrance. Possibly he had gotten wind of the excursion to the radio shack, certainly one man in the alley had lingered around suspiciously before moving on. Indeed, Hargreave might have watched the whole sojourn himself, he was that over-cautious and cagey. And in that case, what was coming?

Dyke went to the lookout he had drilled. Hargreave's office was dark, but there were voices. At the far end of the lab', Dyke, by peering slantwise, could take in approximately one third of the laboratory with its equipment. He failed to see anybody, but Hargreave's voice rumbled: " . . . and I'll be holding the bag? Not on your life. That radium doesn't leave this place until my tracks are covered—what? Go on, the train robbery stuff worked once, yes, but whatever happens here becomes my grief if it's ever found out. Nussir. I cover my trail first."

Dyke scarcely believed his own eardrums; Hargreave in on the theft of the radium, Hargreave whose super-caution—why, only lately he had cautioned Van Wye, made that crook sign a receipt! It must have been, for here were he and Van Wye arguing about it . . . and conniving. Obviously, then, Van Wye had been planted on that ship with Dyke and he——

But the voice answering Hargreave was not Van Wye's. "You should have seen to that before," it declared unsympathetically, "I cannot hover about here indefinitely."

Dyke cupped his hand to one ear; did he recognize that voice?

The same old dogged Hargreave made

reply. "What is, is. So you'll wait until tomorrow night. On that I stand. Dyke has my safe's combination, he has a key to this laboratory. Tomorrow night I'll see that he drinks something in his coffee to make him sleep. Then, as I told you, we'll get his key and the combination off him. Of course, we'll leave the front door open, too. That way it'll look as though he had carelessly allowed somebody to come in and steal the stuff."

"I know all that, but——"

"So you can see," Hargreave persisted, "that as soon as the dummy shipment goes out tomorrow, he automatically becomes accountable for the real shipment waiting here. It lets me out—and him in on the blame."

"You've said all that before."

"Another thing: I've got another young man locked up. He tried to impersonate Dyke and be damned if I know whether he's a sneak-thief after the radium or a spy sent in to watch us here.

"Furthermore, there's a woman mixed up in it, this time, and she's one mean customer. I can't figure her out at all; she and Dyke watch each other like hungry leopards."

"Wait now, let me talk. This other man, you say he is——"

"Harmless. Got him in jail. He'll go free in a week or so."

LON DYKE grinned behind his listening post. Harmless, was he? Not any longer, most certainly not, with young Mellowe completely won over at last. "Oh for a revolver!" he muttered; but on second thought, on which rascal would he use the thing if he could? There was Van Wye, the woman, Hargreave; finally, this new, impatient factor in the case. Which one would first attempt a getaway? Every last one of them evidently suspected the others——

"We must clear out of here. You leave by that fire exit—and take care of that key, return it to me in person before you get away."

"You take care that nothing goes wrong tomorrow night," the other retorted dominatingly, "camping out is one thing, that shack is unspeakable."

They withdrew from the laboratory much as two suspicious dogs quit a bone.

Dyke turned to schemes. One wild plan followed another in his mind. Certainly Mellowe must be told about that stranger's shack. Where might it be? All in all, it might be better to wait out the pair who had just conferred and attempt to get them; yet, how could he? Always these rock-board walls dwarfed his efforts.

Van Wye with the combination to the safe, and the little key to the oak "casket", did not loom so large now; and this extra day Hargreave had prescribed made a reply by radio from old Ben more likely than ever.

Morning again, and the hour when man stokes his life fire for another day. And a prisoner roused from a fruitless sleep that had teemed with dreams. Dyke dug at his eyes, the while remarking, "Last night, Mellowe—" he yawned—"after you left here . . . ! What's the matter?" He was staring into the face Mellowe turned his way. It was marble white, a statue of pallorous loathing and the eyes were slits. "Why, Mellowe!"

The lips parted slightly, stingily. When the voice came hissing through, it smashed down the structure of faith, of mutual confidence, Dyke had bent his every wit to build between himself and this . . . this will o' wisp.

"You low, dirty, bloody sneak," came fervently from the lips, "you'll pay for last night's crime if I have to ruin myself to make you! I shall talk. I'll spill everything I know."

"Crime! Last night—what do you mean?" Dyke stood up. "Mellowe, what do you propose to report?"

"That it was midnight when I let you out of here," the bloodless lips spat out. They added more menacingly, "Just about the time they heard some one enter her room."

"Her——"

"You may be interested to know she was dead when they found her. She can never give away what she knew."

"Dead! Who is it?"

"As though you didn't know," came sarcastically cold. "Mrs. Van Wye was found this morning with knife holes in her back."

IV

MELLOWE'S sealed lips, a revolver at his belt, a native guard at his heels; henceforth the prisoner became a criminal in solitary, no less. They brought the night's rations; they left, an adamant pair. In their wake, Dyke contemplated mining camp justice, doubtless the formalities would be few. Between that grim prospect and the imminent theft of the radium lurked panic for him. He fought it off by diverting his thoughts.

Mellowe, for instance; how much he had depended upon Mellowe. However, no longer; and in these lonely hours he took new stock of the student engineer and a suspicion resulted. Just how square was this Mellowe? Had he been genuine or playing a prescribed role? Was his sending for the Van Wye woman merely a gesture that had boomeranged—and who had killed her?

Van Wye, of course; that was plain. Convinced that Hargreave wouldn't let her leave when he left, Van Wye hadn't dared to risk her tongue around here afterwards.

But Mellowe had released Dyke at the very hour he'd fit into a net of suspicion for her murder. Was Mellowe working with Hargreave or with Van Wye? Or was the fellow honestly endeavoring to do what he thought right?

Anyway, he had not spilled his story—yet. Very likely a certain weakness, a lack of decision in him, was holding it back.

Afternoon brought a respite from dour contemplation. Hargreave led Van Wye into the office. Again he talked through the Ben Dyke plan as though his faith wavered—and well it might, with a person unknown to Van Wye bedeviling him and a murder to deal with. That murder came to the fore now.

"No clues?" Van Wye asked eventually.

"None. With two shady joints and natives around, a woman of her stamp in a place like this should go armed. The wise ones do. I'd rated her wise, but . . . you were right, Dyke, I should have packed her off to San Rey."

Despite the guard with him, Mellowe was questioned by Dyke that night.

"Shut up!" was all the response he got. The two wheeled, army style, and left.

Dyke watched the dimly lighted laboratory. Every silent, lifeless hour of the day had built within him an impulse, a fever of excitement until, at length, he was ready for desperate measures. He'd drill the heavy door, drill around the formidable lock and kick it out. He'd stalk a guard, disarm him, knock him cold . . .

The drill and the three points were gone.

FUTILITY. Helplessness. Deadly, depressing nothingness. Dyke could feel it press down upon him, crush his spirit, dope him. His brain wearied from too much contemplation, his body sagged after endless waiting, just waiting. He gave up his pacing; only random, curious stares out of the holes in the end wall, these he persisted in when thinking beat tom-toms in his brain. Not that it mattered what he might see out there, all he could do would be look on.

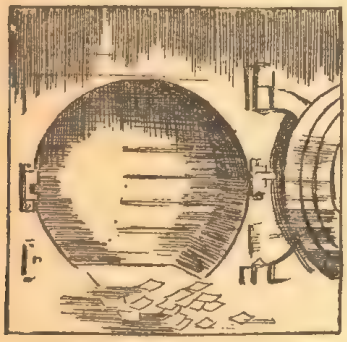
So he was too worn and futile to care greatly when somebody entered the laboratory under his very gaze, a huge somebody whose features the wan light withheld.

However, the apparition went directly to the safe in the office. He held a flashlight with his fingers over it so that the filtered light made a blur on the dial. His right hand came up within that blur and turned the white dial.

Suddenly, in his concentrations upon the readings, he let his fingers slip off the

torch-end. When they did, Alonzo Dyke, peering on past his right shoulder, beheld something that brought a startled curse to his tongue! That great hairy paw, that index finger upraised; somewhere Dyke had seen—many times he had seen that immense hand work in precisely that fashion. It was a habit. Whose?

Try his best, with so much at stake, Dyke could not recall—until there drifted into his overwrought senses one random clue. It hinged upon motion, upon driving, a hand that drove. Was it a car? Radio sending key? . . . A plane! Heidel!



Heidel was huge and hairy, that was his little finger trick . . . but Heidel couldn't be down here. The only way in was the ore trains, he had been here before and was well known—ah, but there was a shack somewhere—and Heidel was a sport flyer. So-o. This was the scoundrel with whom Hargreave had been conniving, waiting in a shack somewhere in the valley to avoid recognition.

The safe door swung open. Lon heard an animal grunt of satisfaction, out came an oak box that was obviously heavy. And Heidel knew radium, he did not open the box to risk exposure to its deadly rays. Aye indeed the fishing was good where Heidel sojourned beyond the call of mail or telephone!

In precious few seconds he'd be off with the loot. Even now he was standing his full six feet plus. He leered at the silent vacancy outside. He crowded the "casket" under a splendid flying coat, the coat that shrieked verification of Dyke's identification of him. Flying away off here to the Andes, the nerve of him!

HE WAS outside the office door, torch snapped off, box gripped under the coat, and features too dim to verify. He turned toward that fire door Dyke had used to reach the wireless shack. Before he could take one step that way, however, a wild, blood-freezing, savage yell smote the still air. It shook the big bottles and glass retorts on the shelf directly below it.

Heidel wheeled as though shot. He backed into the office, tugging at a pistol. He dumped the "casket" onto Hargreave's desk and whipped out the torch. He played it all around the laboratory swiftly.

Until it flicked upon Dyke's wrist. It was filling the hole in the jail wall and the hand was outside. That hand was pawing fiercely, recklessly to the right for something to smash, something that would raise a hue and cry. Over it reached and strained, away over. Before Heidel realized it was human, a large bottle toppled off the shelf. It crashed to the floor. Glass flew, retorts clinked on after it, and an invisible cloud of stifling concentrated ammonium hydroxide spread like wildfire.

Right then, Heidel should have fled. He would have, had he realized what that bottle had given forth. But he was boiling with rage, nobody ever had thwarted him nor would they now. He withheld the noise of shooting for there still was a chance to get the radium away. He charged for that hand, gun butt high to mash it before it could do further damage—or vanish inside.

Then his flashlight clattered down on broken glass. The gun arced downward. Heidel's feet slithered in the alkaline fluid and he went down.

Then the front door flew wide open. Guards. A fast accumulating crowd at their backs. Yells into the night. The danger zone of the mining colony was . . . was what? Somebody had yelled—and only last night the word had gone round

that a woman had been knifed. In they poured. Promptly the human flood reached half-way to the office. Right there its van gasped, gurgled and wilted. Men clawed at their necks, turned about, tried vainly to warn the others. Warn? Down they went to be trampled.

The entire fire alarm system cut loose in one eerie scream. The uproar of it persisted and begat another, more deadly uproar that was mob hysteria. The chief of operations came on the run, but long before he reached the turmoil Dyke's reaching hand found a big bottle at the other side of the hole and this one was filled with concentrated hydrochloric acid. Its crash tossed hissing sprays of poison that united with the ammonia fumes to rise in a white cloud. Then the gasping flood of men knew there must be a fire here somewhere . . . "Fire!"

HARGREAVE fought his way as far as the outer door. He got one look at his office between rolling clouds and cried: "My safe . . . wide open. The stuff is stolen!"

He yanked a chemist's helper off his feet and spun him face to. "Get Dyke—Dyke, I say. He had the key to this place—and the combination to my safe." He shoved the fellow outside where the human wall swallowed him promptly—and Hargreave wondered. Apparently Heidel had got away with the 'casket' as planned, but why this smoke, these damned fumes, the hooray? What could have happened when Heidel entered—or left?

But no Dyke came. "Some of you out there go get that Dyke!" Nobody heeded him. Already choking, he hammered his way to fresh air to supervise the men coming with the hose. No, he would not tolerate nozzles pouring water in there, why should he? There was no fire—he sneezed—it was chemical fumes.

Presently a long, half-clad figure ran past him. Hargreave spied a revolver dangling clumsily, grotesquely in his hand. The chief grabbed at him. "Yeah. I thought it was you. Keep out of there—what in hell can you do?"

"That prisoner——"

"Prisoner be damned, he's safe enough from the poison. Guess you'd better watch him, though." He turned to head off a hose line coming.

Mellowe ran on. He wriggled through the crowd. Outside the door, he filled his lungs and plugged his way on to the jail door, key in hand. He opened, ducked in. Something rocked his head in a shower of stars. He was borne down while determined fingers wrenched the weapon from his loosened grasp.

"Now, sir—" Dyke's voice in his face—"where could a plane land in this valley? Talk up."

Mellowe writhed under the man astride him, writhed against the cold muzzle of that revolver.

"Talk fast, nobody'd hear this thing go off. Where can a plane land?"

"I told you they tried out a plane once——"

"I know. Where's the runway, the take-off? You get what I mean. Where?"

"The old ore car tracks up there back of——"

"That's enough, get up. Mellowe, the radium was stolen a few minutes ago. He's getting away in a plane. We leave here by that fire exit door; your key. Quick. Watch your step, this gun'll be at your back. Lead off."

DESPITE the clouds of ammonium chloride smoke, some one saw them scuttling along the wall. One yelled above the babel, Dyke jabbed the revolver to Mellowe's ribs, they vanished.

Mellowe fumbled the fire door key in his haste and fear; at his back pressed the man he believed had already murdered a woman.

"Get that dam——" Dyke began. Out flew the door. "Run!"

Thus beneath the overhanging laboratory as Dyke had gone to the radio shack. That shack appeared, its metal poles pierced a

constellation already fading in the first tints of coming dawn. Mellowe halted. He looked both ways. In the momentary silence came sounds from the uproar within the building overhead. Back at that fire exit somebody squawked, "Wide open. C'me on; they went this way. The thief! He's armed!"

Mellowe seized the threat of pursuit to start left up the slope to the street.

"No, sir. Make for that old track, the landing place," Dyke warned. He shoved the tall, uncertain body on . . . and they put the radio shack behind them.

"Now where is it?" Dyke snapped.

"Off there—" pointing north, up past the newer narrow gauge to the mine—"up valley beyond there."

"Be damsure you're right."

"Am. Old worked-out leads. Make a long runway, sort of, from the dump. For that plane they tried out."

"All right," impatiently, "save your wind. Hot foot!"

Into the first dawn streaks they cut the wind. Dyke dreaded that growing light with pursuers mobbing toward him.

Now came the shiny rails. They crossed that pair . . . another pair like them. Away, somewhere at their left, stood the Y, the fork where the old discarded line to the worked-out leads joined the new. Neither runner noticed that fork. Nor did either see the big handcar off there; they just bored on and on—until Mellowe started a rock to rolling down the talus they were crossing. It swept along loose stuff with it. A small landslide followed noisily—and the wild pack back there heard it. They saw the dust rise. "There they go-o! Down . . . other . . . that slope. C'me on-n!"

But the rest didn't come and the next Dyke heard behind him was a howling mob on the rails; they had packed onto the handcar.

Dyke heard the rails at his feet vibrate. "Over this way, into the gully," he panted. Mellowe dared not ignore it. Together they stumbled and rolled into a small gully several yards away from the tracks. Mellowe made a vocal sound.

"I'll kill you!" Dyke whispered—"if they don't beat me to it. Shut your mouth tight. So help me——"

"I—I can't . . . I'm . . . winded."

THE UPROAR boomed past them like a banana-belt revolution. Now then, how long before they'd discover that their quarry wasn't ahead of them any more? Right away they'd come back. Dyke raised his head, set his ear to the valley wind, listened. One of them had fired a shot. A hullaballoo echoed with the report of the gun. In it a new note of savage triumph. That note told him what had happened.

"Up out of this," he ordered. "We'll join them."

"Did you say 'join?' "

"Right. Go on. They've caught the radium thief—hear that gunfire? And it's stopped. They've caught him."

Dyke was not far from right. He saw the crowded handcar out ahead. Beyond

it, a man running clumsily, desperately, in heavy clothing. He was clutching a gun and by this time it was useless, he had emptied it at his pursuers. But he hadn't a chance to escape them; the valley up there narrowed to a gorge with vertical sides, a veritable trap—and a fairly good starting point for that big plane farther on. If he once reached the plane . . . !

Now the crowd leaped clear of their car. It coasted a little way on, they made for the runner and swarmed on him like wolves.

It required Mellowe's dogged persuasion

and Dyke's gun to pry them off that runway. At the bottom of the mêlée the immense, athletic Heidel struggled until he lay battered and gasping. The fear of a lynching was in his eyes until something, somebody, pulled the man-hunters off him. Thereupon he shuddered and sat up awkwardly, his left hand pressing a bulkiness under his flying coat now in shreds.

Dyke's eyes saw only that bulk. He stood close to Heidel and, gun ready, ordered, "Onto your feet, Heidel. Hand me that box."

The new day glinted on the weapon. Heidel saw it. His eyes traveled to the face beyond it.

"Dyke . . . here!" He blurted from his bleeding lips.

"I'll be damned," came from Mellowe at Dyke's elbow. "So you are Dyke!"

"Rather. And there's the radium thief, my uncle's partner, if you please. You've seen this Mr. Heidel before, the sport aviator, fisherman, you remember?"

Maybe Mellowe did, but all he could do at present was gape.

Dyke turned to those who had pummelled Heidel. "Bind his legs somehow. Run him back to the laboratory office. Use the handcar."

"Lookit that plane . . . up the valley!"

"Never mind that, move this prisoner along." Dyke gripped the "casket" to his ribs. "Mellowe and I can walk this radium in." He turned to Mellowe, "Then we'll gather in Hargreave and that Van Wye."

"Cripes," Mellowe muttered when they were on their way, "why didn't that gang maul us?"

"Because first Heidel was running from them; second, he plainly tells them I'm Dyke by blurting my name out."

DESPITE fire sirens, uproars and broad daylight, Van Wye slept on. He had been called a score of times without avail. Hargreave's dope in his coffee had proved extremely potent.

Dyke left him as was. He went looking for Hargreave. His search led eventually to the ore train terminal where stood a native workman with a checker.

"Señor Hargr-reave?" the one repeated. "Gone."

"Gone where?"

The shoulders hunched. "Beega rosh, señor. He take a wild engine, vamos muy pronto!"

The American checker added: "You see, he'd just received a radio message from Philly. I think it was bad news."

Bugs Seized An Opportunity—But It Didn't Just Stick

Bugs Beemer—Bandit

By FRANK C. & O. A. ROBERTSON

BUGS BEEMER gave the cattle buyer a sympathetic grin as the latter arose from the card table with an expressive shrug.

"One thing about it," the buyer remarked to Bugs, but in a tone loud enough for his late companions to hear, "they don't waste time. I lost twenty dollars in ten minutes."

"We're not runnin' a piker's game," a hard-faced gambler sneered.

"I can see that," the buyer laughed. He started to say more, but something in the eyes of two of the gamblers warned him that it would not be best. He wandered away toward the bar, and Bugs resumed his inconspicuous place just back of the table.

For a long time Bugs had been watching that game, and he knew its sole object was to clean a young fellow of about twenty-one who had started with a lot of money and was playing more and more feverishly as the game went on. But Bugs was actuated by curiosity rather than sympathy. The young fellow was foul-mouthed and hard-faced. His whole expression proclaimed that he was no good. Bugs only wondered where he had got so much money.

It was no concern of his. In fact Bugs' only concern was to keep from being recognized by somebody who might have seen his name and picture on a poster. He had broken out of a jail two weeks before and at present he was low on funds. This was the first time that he had ventured among the haunts of men. The sight of all that gold and currency on the table made his fingers itch, but he didn't permit it to show. And he had no intention of doing anything about it. All he wanted was a little companionship and a chance to buy some supplies in the morning with his last remaining money. Being loath to retire, he waited until the crowd began to thin down after midnight. And he was waiting for young Vernon to lose the last of his money.

The young fellow had become silent and morose. At last he shoved in the last of his chips and called for a showdown. He lost. For a moment he sat white faced and disheveled, as though stunned by the full realization of his futility.

"Well, I guess that's all for tonight," the dealer remarked, as he drew a cash sack from the table drawer and began stuffing away the night's receipts. With an insane, burning light in his eyes the pro-

tane young Vernon sat and watched him until the operation was completed.

"That's all for tonight, or any other night as far as you're concerned," Vernon suddenly shot out, as he twisted himself about and seized the back of the heavy chair he had been sitting on.

"Don't be brash, kid," the gambler warned coldly. "Nobody asked you to come in here and play with your sister's money. You wanted to gamble and we accommodated you. So don't start anything."

"Start? By God, I'm finishin' you," Vernon snarled. With insane fury he whirled the chair above his head and struck viciously across the table, so hard that he lost his balance and fell, taking the table down with him. It was perhaps the only thing that saved his life.

BUGS dived for the floor, and a man standing just behind him cried out with pain as a gun in the gambler's hand roared.

Bugs remained on the floor, but several things made their imprint upon his alert if somewhat erratic mind. The gambler who had shot and young Vernon were wrestling upon the floor. The bag of money lay within four feet of Bugs' hand where it had fallen when the table was overturned. Back of where the man had been shot a lane had opened through the circle of spectators as they ducked away from the path of the bullet. In the lane thus created Bugs suddenly saw a trap door open and a pair of startled eyes in a badger-like face appear. It was the saloon swamper coming out of the cellar to see what was going on.

Other things Bugs saw, too. He saw the second gambler vainly trying to get a shot at young Vernon without hitting his partner. Then a shot rang out and the whole room was plunged into darkness amid a tinkling of shattered glass.

"Everybody stay where you are," roared the bartender. "I've got a sawed-off shotgun and I'll sprinkle the first man who opens a door. Swamper, get another lamp."

Bugs Beemer's groping hand shot out and found the bag of money. Three seconds later he dropped through the open trap door and pulled it shut. Striking a match and shading it from above with his open hand he discovered the door leading outside at the rear. It was heavily barred from the inside, but Bugs was outside and heading for the livery stable before a light appeared inside the saloon.

His horse was in the feed lot outside. He caught the animal, got his saddle and was riding away before the surprised attendant knew what it was all about.

Wild and reckless though he was, and with as little regard for conventions or reverence for vested authority as any untamed animal on the range, Bugs was never without consideration for his horse. And he knew better than to wind his animal in a senseless dash to put distance quickly behind him.

He considered the chances of immediate pursuit. The money would be missed at once, and he might or might not be. Anyway, the stableman would soon report his hurried departure and then men would remember that he had been in the saloon at the time of the fight. Any way it would go hard for him if he was captured now, either with or without the money in his possession.

Daybreak found him nearing the top of a high, notch-like pass and he surmised that he had put about twenty miles behind him. The instinct of the hunted to make for high, rough country had drawn him this way, but now he regretted his choice of direction. For fifteen miles he had been following up the bottom of a steep, narrow canyon. To make any time at all he had to follow a single well beaten trail where his horse's tracks were clearly imprinted. To discontinue these tracks now would merely mark the place where he had turned off.

He realized now that he had acted with the usual impetuosity and propensity for

getting into trouble, which had earned him his monicker. He could easily have made his escape, and now he had deliberately brought fresh pursuit down on himself. He was troubled by no twinges of conscience. Though he had a certain code of honor of his own the law meant nothing to him except the banding together of timid people for mutual protection. He could never imagine himself turning to it for safety. It was merely a matter to which he ascribed no importance one way or the other, except that its very existence presented a challenge, and in all his wild and reckless young life a challenge was something he had never learned to ignore.

The gamblers he had robbed had fired shots and had threatened the crowd with a shotgun. That showed that they relied upon violence and brute force to protect their interests. It was that implied challenge which had prompted Bugs to take the money. They had gambled that nobody could take it away from them; he had bet that he could.

THE rising sun was painting the tops of the peaks on either side of the notch when he passed from one canyon into the head of another. To continue on would land him soon in another populated valley. His situation was getting precarious un-

less he could find a place to hide until dark.

Then, two miles from the notch, he suddenly became aware of another set of horse tracks in the trail ahead of him, leading in the same direction. He stopped and glanced around. The tracks had come into the trail from the right. Quickly he dismounted and with a small sage bush eliminated one set of tracks where they overlapped, and all of those entering and leaving the trail. With this bit of strategy completed he mounted again and angled off through the brush and timber that studded this side of the canyon.

Just over the first ridge he dismounted and staked his horse in a little open space surrounded by aspens. Then he found a concealed position which commanded a section of the trail he had just quitted.

Within an hour a posse of hard riding men burst into view. But, oblivious to the ruse that had been worked, they dashed on in confident assurance that speed was the one thing necessary to bring them within striking distance of their quarry.

Bugs laughed and relaxed. He rolled a cigarette. Once more lady luck had been with him. He took time to count the money in the bag. There was seven thousand and ninety dollars. He took out four twenty dollar gold pieces and one ten and dropped them into his pocket. The bag now contained an even seven thousand dollars. He wrapped it in his coat and tied it behind the cantle of his saddle.

He was hungry and inaction weighed heavily upon him, but it would be dangerous to start traveling until nightfall. Long before that the posse would have decided that it was chasing the wrong man and returned home. Shortly before noon two ancient looking pack mules emerged from the timber and paused to visit with his horse. Their presence implied a sheep camp close around, and if some campjack came in search of his mules he might run across Bugs. But a camp also offered a suggestion of something to eat. He decided to scout the country a little.

Presently he came in sight of an old placer diggings. There was a cabin close at hand, but on account of the brush it escaped his observation.

Then, just as he was about to emerge into an open space, he was suddenly halted and sent scrambling back into cover. Fifty

feet from where he crouched a young woman, or girl, had appeared in view.

Where she had come from, or what she was doing, other than watching the trail, Bugs could not imagine. But he knew that it was only luck that had saved him from being observed. And his shelter was so limited that he dared not leave before she did—and she showed no inclination whatever to move from the spot.

IT WAS evident that she was much interested in something down the canyon, for she sat down upon a boulder and scanned the trail intently. Bugs' view was cut off by the bushes which screened him, so he could only guess at what she saw, and hope that it wasn't another posse.

Then Bugs caught the thud of hoofs, and knew what he had long suspected, that she had been waiting for some one. Then a lone horseman appeared and Bugs instantly recognized young Vernon, the fellow who had lost the money which Bugs had grabbed. Not until then did Bugs remember having heard somebody remark that it was his sister's money the fellow was losing.

"Jack, where in the world have you been? What has kept you so long?" the girl demanded.

"I've been all right. I told you not to worry, didn't I?" young Vernon retorted harshly. "I've been trying to scare up a buyer for this alleged mine of the old man's."

"Did you?" the girl asked eagerly.

"I got a fella to half way promise to come out an' look at it. Maybe he'll offer you a hundred dollars for it if you throw in the mules. An' listen, Marge; if he does, you take it. The claim was worked out years ago, and everybody knows it. There ain't an ounce of gold left on the whole damned creek."

"That's what the engineer said who was here yesterday," the girl said drearily. "He said the place showed clearly enough that for the last few years father had merely been prospecting around."

"Sure? I've savvied that all along. The old man just struck a rich pocket and worked it out. Ever since then he's just been messin' around."

"Jack, what's the matter with your face?" the girl suddenly demanded. "You've been fighting."

"Well, what of it? It ain't no skin off your nose, is it?"

"Have you been gambling again?" The girl's voice rose wildly.

Her brother merely sat and stared sullenly out across the canyon. He neither admitted nor denied.

"Oh, Jack, how could you?" the girl asked brokenly. "That was my money, and mother's. You'd gambled all of your share away. You had no right to take ours. How much did you lose?"

"All of it."

THE girl quivered under the shock. She tried to say something but words wouldn't come. If her brother felt sympathy or contrition his manner did not show it.

"There's no use makin' a fuss about it," he growled. "I'll pay it back."

"You can't. And you wouldn't if you could," the girl charged angrily. "You're just utterly selfish as you've always been. But what are we going to do?"

"Well, I'm not goin' to stay here an' watch you weep all over the place," the fellow asserted contentiously. "But if you like money so damned well there's plenty of chances for a good looker like you to pick up a quick stake around any of these cowtowns."

"Jack, I could murder you," the girl cried.

"Aw, be yourself. I was just givin' you a tip. You wouldn't have to do anything you didn't want to do. Any kind of a female can make suckers out of these stockmen, and a sweet young thing in a gingham dress can take 'em for more than they've got."

"You're contemptible," the girl shot out.

"Well, maybe you'll learn. If you have

to start hashin' in one of these cowtown restaurants to earn your fare back home, and pick yourself a rich husband maybe you'll thank me for fixin' it for you."

"Yes, you fixed it for me."

"Sure," Vernon said callously. "I've fixed it so you'll have to or walk home, an' seven hundred miles is a long walk. But maybe if that sap comes to look at the diggin's you can sell him the mules for car fare. You've got plenty of grub. Better stick around a few days an' see if he does come."

"And you?"

"Never mind about me. I'm on my way." With no softening of his hard exterior young Vernon rode away.

The girl took a few steps after him, and opened her mouth as if to speak, but her emotions were too full for utterance. For a long time she stood gazing after her brother, then turned and made her way toward the claim.

Heartfelt, though unuttered, profanity welled up within Bugs Beemer as he crouched unseen in the bushes. "The dirty sneak," he muttered under his breath. "Steal from his own sister, an' then cut her loose in a place like this without even givin' her a chance to say good-bye. I thought them gamblers were crooks, but he's worse than them. Hell, they'd send me to the pen an' leave things like them at large!"

A tantalizing aroma of coffee issued from the open door when, an hour later, Bugs rode up to the cabin. He caught a glimpse of the girl as he dismounted and approached the door, but it was a minute or more before she reappeared to answer his knock. Though there was evidence that she had made a hasty effort to remove the signs of her recent crying she met him with a smile of friendly interrogation.

"You're Miss Vernon, I reckon," Bugs tried to match the girl's smile and removed his hat.

"Yes. Won't you come in?"

"Thank you," Bugs accepted the invitation. "I, er, your brother was tellin' me over in Handover that you was thinkin' some of sellin' these diggin's. Me an' my pardner we figgered that if you didn't want too much for it we'd kinda like to buy it. Your brother told me any kind of a deal I made with you would be all right with him."

"Oh, he did?" The girl certainly was startled. "Did he set any price on it?"

"Well, not exactly; only that you'd been askin' ten thousand dollars for it. I told him that was higher than we could go, but he allowed that he was all washed up here an' that you might take less."

The girl was plainly amazed and upset. She wanted to gain time.

"Won't you sit down. An' perhaps you'll have some dinner with me? It's all ready."

"Gosh, I'll be glad to," Bugs accepted with alacrity. "To tell the truth that bacon an' coffee smells better to me than any gold mine."

While Bugs washed and made himself as presentable as possible the girl busied herself setting the table. A few minutes later they were seated opposite each other across the rough pine boards.

"Anyway," he complimented the girl on her culinary achievements, "whether this minin' deal pans out or not, this meal more than repays me for my ride out here."

"Thank you," the girl smiled. "Do you know I never would have taken you for a mining man. You look far more like a range man. Tell me—do you know anything at all about mining?"

A LIKABLE grin flashed across Bugs' face. "To tell the truth, miss, I don't know a thing about it," he admitted. "You see it's my pardners who really want the mine. They sent me out with what money they're willin' to pay an' full authority to make the deal. So you don't need to worry about a thing."

"And how much are they willing to pay?" For the moment the girl's voice had gone hard. Somewhere inside him Bugs felt a faint stir of disappointment.

"I'll be honest with you," he said. "I

might try to haggle, but that ain't my way. I can give you seven thousand dollars, an' no more. All you have to say is yes, or no."

"The answer is no," the girl said flatly. "I wouldn't accept any offer that you could make because the claim we own is utterly worked out and worthless."

"Wha-ot?" Bugs gasped, and a proud, almost fatherly grin came over his sunburned features. "You mean you won't sell it?"

"That's just what I mean. If my brother told you differently he lied."

"Sister, you sure put me in a tough spot," Bugs remarked after a considerable silence.

"Why, how can that be?"

"Because I've got seven thousand dollars out here that I was told to give you, an' you won't take it."

"But you can give it back to your mining friends. Surely that'll be easier than telling them you knowingly bought worthless property."

"But I can't give it back," Bugs wailed.

"I don't understand. Why?"

"Because it's your money. You see there was a bunch of us watchin' your brother go through all that money, an' when we learned that it was yours we decided that something oughta be done about it. We knew them gamblers was crooks. So, when we saw there was no chance for your brother to get it back, we, that is, er, me an' a couple of the boys slipped in an' stuck up the game."

"You mean you robbed a saloon just—just to get my money back for me?" The girl's eyes filled with tears.

"Well, these other boys had seen you. They was the ones who done the job. I was stationed just outside on a fast horse to bring you the money, while they mingled with the crowd an' played innocent. I was to buy the mine, but now that you won't sell it you'll have to take it as it lays."

"I can't take that kind of money," the girl objected. "It—it would be compounding a crime—or something."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Bugs burst out. "Refusin' to take your own money. Hell,

wouldn't that be better than turnin' on your friends who tried to help you?"

"You mean that I might tell the law what you've told me?" the girl cried indignantly. "Of course I wouldn't do that. What you and your friends tried to do was splendid. But I can't take it."

SUDDENLY Bugs began to chuckle. "I won't take it with me because I'd be sure to git caught with it on me an' go over the road. If I leave it here you can't send it back because you'd have to explain how you come by it. An' you certainly ain't fool enough to send your own money back to a bunch of crooked gamblers who stole it from you. You ain't got nothin' to stay here for, have you?"

"No, but——"

"Do you know when the first train leaves?"

"Yes, there's one going east at midnight. My home is in Denver."

"Got any way of goin' to the station?"

"I have the mules. I can ride one and pack my things on the other."

Bugs excused himself and went out to his horse. A moment later he returned and placed the sack of money on the table.

"There it is," he said, "and now I'll make you a proposition. We'll both start

from scratch an' see who can git away from it the quickest an' the fartherest."

"You mean just leave it lying there on the table? We couldn't do that."

"Then don't be foolish," Bugs said. "If I was you I'd catch that midnight train. If you start now you can get out of the canyon before dark, and you'll have three hours to cross the flats. You can just about make it."

"And you?" The girl's voice was trembling.

"I reckon I'll be goin' the other way. But I'll stay and help you pack. Then I'll be sayin' adios."

"If you'll catch and saddle my mules I'll pack my belongings," she said. "Two or three suitcases is all I've got. It won't take long."

"And the money?" Bugs asked with a grin.

"I'll take it. After all it is my money. I'll take enough out to pay my fare and put the rest in a suitcase."

"An' the bag we'll put in the fire," Bugs said.

Half an hour later Bugs sat his horse on top of the ridge and watched the girl slowly making her way down to the trail. Not until she reached it and passed out of sight did he change his position. Then he turned and rode slowly back toward the cabin.

He removed his hand from his pocket and jingled the five gold pieces in his palm.

"Well," he soliloquized, "the haul wasn't as rich as it promised to be, but I reckon it ain't such a bad day's work after all. There's grub enough left in the cabin to last me a week, an' by that time they'll have stopped lookin' for me.

"But seven thousand dollars is sure one hell of a price to pay for one week's grub."

The Ripshin Killer, Loose from Jail, Had Only One Idea—Vengeance

RIPSHIN KILLER

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Blood Law," "Jailbird," etc.

OLD Sheriff George Hale drew up at the door of his jail's strongest cell and peered through at Abner Gudridge, black-bearded giant, erstwhile terror of the far-back Ripshin Mountain country. Gudridge was pacing the stone floor and swearing aloud to himself.

"You got to stop cussin' that way, Ab." Hale's voice was kindly. Gudridge was under sentence of death. "You see, folks can hear you from the street. Women and children, you know. It ain't right, Ab."

"No, ner hit ain't right fer me to be hung!" The giant prisoner garnished this with another choice oath. "That co'te and jury tuck the word o' Mart Ensley—hit war that which done fer me. The word o' one lone man! Ef I could only git out o' yar long enough to kill him, i-god, I——"

Hale interrupted. "Mart was an eyewitness, and he's a good man, too good a man to perjure himself for you or anybody else. But we've been over this a dozen times before. You're guilty, Ab. You shot Dave Sullins down for almost nothin' at all. I don't want to tie and gag you, but if you don't stop this cussin' and takin' on I'll be forced to do it."

The old sheriff turned, walked down the corridor and toward his office in a front corner of the squat brick jail building. Gudridge cursed him—under his breath—again and again. Then Gudridge began to think of escape once more. If he had just one friend on Ripshin, one friend who would sneak down here to Johnsboro and give him aid from the outside—but he hadn't. He'd hurt too many people.

He went to the small, barred rear window and stood there staring toward a hotel garbage can across the rubbish-littered alley without really seeing it. An hour passed, and he hadn't moved. Then he realized that a figure in tatters was stooping over the can and pawing through the refuse. The fellow was starving, or he wouldn't be doing that. Ab Gudridge's mean, dark eyes narrowed to a pair of slits.

The tramp might be used in lieu of a friend from Ripshin!

Softly, the big prisoner whistled. The

tramp turned an unwashed, unshaven face toward him. One of Gudridge's hamlike hands slipped between the bars and waved a banknote, the last money Gudridge had. The tramp blinked, glanced both ways along the alley, and stole to the barred window.

"This yar money'd buy a sight o' grub, feller," the condemned man whispered. "The' ain't no chanst fer you'un to be ketched, nuther. Hit air plum' safe, i-god. Do whut I say, and the money air yore'n. Right?"

The hungry eyes of the man outside burned with desire. Then fear crept into them. Gudridge looked toward the cell door, saw nobody, and went on whispering.

"Do hit atter dark tonight. On the railroad at the nawth aidge o' town the' air a rock quarry. Go thar and sneak out a crowbar, and fetch hit to me yar, and y'gits this five dollars. Right?"

"No!" the tramp whispered back. "No!"

BUT hunger rides with a sharp spur. Not long after darkness had fallen, the tramp brought the crowbar, passed it silently through the cell window, and received the banknote. Gudridge hid the crowbar under his blanket. The railroad ran within half a block of the jail, and the first train to pass would make noise enough to drown the noise he would make prying the window bars out the masonry.

He had not long to wait. Desperation gave him the strength of a Samson. His one difficulty was in squeezing his big body through the small window.

Fifteen long, rugged miles lay between the foothills town and Ripshin Mountain. Abner Gudridge had covered all those miles when dawn broke. Mart Ensley's cabin was his objective. He had told Ensley in the courtroom that he would kill him if he had to come out of the grave to do it. He meant to do it now. Then he would flee to the mountains of Virginia and there lose himself.

But he must have a gun. He stole up to a ramshackle log cabin, and stamped in without the formality of a halloo or a rap at the door. A poorly-clad woman and two poorly-clad children, both girls, were at a breakfast of corn dodger and bacon, black sorghum and spicewood tea. Gudridge snapped his gaze to an empty pair of wooden hooks nailed to a log above the smoked mantel.

"Whar's Sam's rifle gun at?" he barked.

There was fear, but not craven fear, in Hat Rane's lean countenance. She said, in a voice that she tried hard to keep steady:

"Sam air a-workin' at that thar big loggin'-camp over on Mad Kate's River. He'un thought he mought see a squirrel, and he'un tuck his rifle gun along over thar."

The killer glared. The woman swallowed. Then she knew.

"Ab," she cried, "you'un air aimin' fer to kill pore Mart Ensley! You'un mustn't! Pore Mart, he'un buried his wife week afore last, and got his arm bruck and his knee busted at the loggin' yistiddy; air a-layin' on the flat o' his back in bed, with only his boy to do things fer him. Fer the love o' God, Ab, you'un mustn't!"

"He'un swore me to hang," Ab said bitterly. "Swore me to hang, Hat. I reckon I won't need a gun, mebbe. I'll just crack his neck acrost the bed-rail with my two hands. Hit's simpler."

His glittering eye fell upon the breakfast table then. A night of hard walking had made him very hungry. He sat down and attacked the coarse food wolfishly. Hat Rane went slowly to her feet and backed away to the wired-together cast-iron stove. Her children followed her, clung to her skirts. She was thinking fast and hard. Suddenly she caught the eye of the eldest small girl, and began to shape words without sound.

"Go tell Mart Ensley! Go tell Mart! Sneak out! Sneak out!"

Gudridge didn't notice. She repeated

it. At last the child caught it, slipped from the cabin, and ran like a fox through the scrubby woods, over the rough stones.

Mart Ensley was tall, lanky, about thirty-two. His broken arm and bruised knee had given him a bad night, but he did his best toward smiling at the tow-headed, barefoot ten-year-old boy who brought a cup of thin black coffee to his bed.

"Thankee, Little Rabbit," he drawled softly, affectionately. "I dunno whut I'd do ef I didn't have you'un, son. With pore Sadie gone, you'un air all I got left on earth——"

He couldn't talk any more about that, of stern stuff though he was. The boy, also, was of stern stuff.

"Hit shore war hell, pappy——"

Little Rabbit pointed to his sire's splinted and bandaged arm. "Hit must hurt you'un a sight, pappy. Loggin' comp'ny doctor air got to come five mile to git yar, but he'un'll come, bekase he said so yistiddy, and mebbe he'un can ease yore misery up a mite."

"Yeah," said Mart, over his coffee, "he'un will come. This yar break, hit air a-gittin' better right now. The cawffee done hit. I——"

HAT RANE'S little daughter had arrived.

She was panting so that she could scarcely talk. "Mart—listen! Ab Gudridge air got—outen the jail—at ourns's house now—a-comin' fer to kill you'un, he tole mammy!"

Mart Ensley was ashen-white when she finished. He tried to lift himself to the elbow of his sound arm. The effort wrung a groan of pain from him, and he sank weakly back to the cheap cotton pillow.

"Run, Jinny," he urged—"git away from yar quick, afore that black-bearded devil ketches you'un yar, fer because he air crazy with hate! Little Rabbit, fetch me my rifle gun—oh, goshens, I cain't do nothin', not even with a gun!"

"I can, i'god," the lad bit out. "Hustle home, Jinny. Take roundin's on the creek trail, so's you'un won't meet up with Ab Gudridge. Hustle! Pappy—you'un never would let me shoot a gun, but you'un air got to let me do hit now. I air seed you shoot, and I air seed you load. Please, pappy!"

"The' hain't nothin' else fer hit," Ensley said. "You'un mought miss with the rifle, Little Rabbit. Git down the shotgun.

Putten a good load into hit. Better hurry."

The boy noted that Jenny Rane was gone. He closed and pegged both doors. Then he loaded the old, single-barreled, muzzle-loading shotgun, while his father watched through a window that faced down the mountain.

But Ab Gudridge's cunning never would have permitted him to approach the Ensley cabin from that direction. He approached it from above, came as silently as some jungle beast. There was no window in the chimney end. He glued an eye to a tiny crack beside the chimney.

"Stop a-wearyin', pappy," implored the boy inside.

Much concerned because of the anxiety he saw mirrored in the face of his sire, Little Rabbit turned to the bed and with one hand began to straighten the coverlet. It was Gudridge's chance. He tiptoed swiftly to the door, threw his great weight against it and broke off short the pegs that had served in lieu of a bar. A split second later he was in possession of the shotgun. The boy he flung into a corner. Little Rabbit lay there stunned.

"Swore me to hang, didn' you'un!" the killer snarled at Ensley.

The corners of his black-bearded mouth worked in foam. He lifted the gun, full-cocked. Mart Ensley spoke evenly:

"Please, Ab, don't hurt my kid. Do whutever else——"

His ears had caught the sound of hoofbeats. The logging company doctor, maybe. If he'd only hurry! Gudridge, too, heard the hoofbeats. The shotgun flamed and roared, and the smoke of cheap black powder filled the cabin. The boy struggled up to his bare feet and reeled through the acrid fog toward Abner Gudridge. Worse than useless, his fighting that murderous brute barehanded, but——

"Little Rabbit!"

It couldn't be his pappy's voice. Yet it was! Then he saw. Gudridge lay on the floor, his bearded face an unrecognizable, crimson-dripping mask, dead. Sheriff George Hale dismounted just outside.

"The gun blowed up at the britch!" Hale heard Mart Ensley saying. "Thank goshens, Little Rabbit, you'un didn't shoot that gun! How much powder and shot did you'un put in her, anyhow, son?"

"All we'uns had, i-god," promptly answered the boy. "Fer bekase I meant to be shore to git him ef he-un come a-tryin' to kill my pappy."

Handsome McGraw of the HP Finds He Isn't So Bad at Some Other Things

As Handsome Does

By B. M. BOWER

Author of "The Piute Monster," "On with the Dance," etc.

A MONTH-OLD *Chinook Journal* bearing the stale news of McKinley's presidential inauguration whipped loose from a sage bush alongside the Flatwillow Hotel and sailed out into the wide sandy street just as Handsome McGraw came racing his own dust into town on a big sorrel bronc he was breaking to ride. With an almost human malevolence the whooping wind spread the new President's smudged portrait across the steaming chest of the sorrel, where it clung, pasted flat by the bronc's own sweat.

The wild horse squatted and ducked. Then like a ricocheting bullet he shot slantwise across the street in a blind terrified rush which nothing could stop. Lanky young McGraw was used to that. Instinctively he drove bony knees against stirrup leathers and braced himself, yelling an admonitory epithet from force of habit. Then his heart came up and choked the breath back down his throat.

Straight in his path stood a slim little woman with blue ruffled skirt whipping around her ankles, wide blue eyes staring out from her white face frozen blank of all expression.

Handsome McGraw did not think what to do. Not consciously. He was a slow deep thinker and he didn't have time. There was the little blue lady, a vision of loveliness where no vision should be. And a thousand-pound missile of crazed broncho driving at her.

He did not think what to do. He just did it. A certain deft twist and a hard yank, catching the horse in midstride. Wrists like steel cables, and as merciless. One big-rowelled spur raked the cantle as they came down in a heap, dust in a solid wave like splashed water breaking over the blue vision where she stood. It filled nostrils and mouth, laid a gray mask upon her pallor, clogged her long lashes with grit. She stood and spat dust and blinked —but she stood, thank God. She was not a tragic, trampled spot of blue in the dust.

CONSIDERABLY jolted and scared out of his shyness, young McGraw stood up. Automatically he swore, "You gawdamn son of a something, I'll beat your

gawdamm brains to a pulp! You——"

"Oh! Aren't you hurt?"

Panic froze Handsome, then the hot blood surged up in a crimson wave. "No, ma'am," he gulped, and turned precipitately away, leading his chastened mount by a bridle rein. His spine still tingled with the tone of her voice.

With the stout tie rope from his saddle he snubbed the trembling sorrel securely to the rein-polished hitch rail in front of the store, taking twice as much time as was necessary and keeping his back toward the place where the vision had stood.

He was horribly embarrassed and ashamed of himself. He had committed the unpardonable sin of swearing in front of a lady and he burned at the thought of facing her again. It never occurred to him that she might possibly be aware that he had risked his own neck to save her life, or that she might want to thank him or say a word of appreciation for his splendidly reckless horsemanship. He guessed she thought he was making a grandstand play, throwing his horse like that, right in front of her. A smart-aleck, maybe.

Sure that she was gone now, he turned to enter the store. There she stood, once more directly in his path on the sidewalk, wiping dust from her face, shaking dust from her blue ruffles—but at the same time watching him intently.

"That was an awful fall! Sure you aren't——?"

"No ma'am, I ain't hurt, I'm used to it." For a brief, measureless space Handsome looked into her eyes. Then he swung short around and hurried down to the nearest saloon, feeling a little dizzy, though not from the fall.

Freckled bare arms folded upon the bar, the proprietor looked up, nodded and returned to the *Police Gazette* he was boredly perusing for possibly the tenth time. Handsome McGraw was no customer of his. He drank nothing stronger than pop or rootbeer, and then only to be sociable with a crowd. His gambling was limited to an occasional game of sol in the bunkhouse on stormy days. To a saloon-keeper he was profitless and uninteresting; neither welcome nor unwelcome, just a presence in the room.

But a presence inwardly agitated to the center of his shy soul. With apparent calm he rolled and smoked a cigarette, sitting on a card table with his long legs in their scarred leather chaps thrust out before him. He was all shaky inside. Thoughts whirling, he scowled down his long, sun-peeled nose that had given him his nickname in sheer sarcasm.

GOD, that was a close call! What if he had ridden her down? A feller would want to go off and shoot himself. Little bit of a thing—he'd bet she could stand under his arm and have room to spare. He sure liked that shade of blue. Just matched her eyes. That ribbon belt—it would make a dandy hatband, only the boys would guy him to death if they ever caught him with a girl's ribbon on his hat—or his bridle. Who was she anyway? Some pilgrim, or she wouldn't get out in the street when a bronc was heading into town. A man that would leave newspapers blowing around loose had oughta be hung. You couldn't blame the horse for getting scared. That throw was something he'd never tried before. Saw it done, once—damn good thing he got the right twist. Nothing you'd want to do for the fun of it—liable to cripple your horse. Lord, what a picture she made! Bet he could span her ankle with a thumb and finger!

He flushed hotly and sent a guilty glance toward the sleek bowed head of the bored saloonkeeper. Damn fool, with a beak like his, no woman would——

The bartender did not even glance up when Handsome went out and slammed the door against the wind—and his foolish, secret thoughts.

Big spurs clanking on the sidewalk, the homeliest rider of the HP outfit—and the best and the kindest—went into the store for the ranch mail. And there she was, turning over small fat bolts of lace at the

counter across the aisle from the postoffice corner. Too late to retreat, Handsome stood leaning an elbow on the General Delivery shelf and waited. And watched her. The way her hair curled down behind her

ears, loose strands from the brown coil at the nape of her neck.

Suddenly she turned and gave him a full measuring look as she left the store. Handsome McGraw, dreaming of waltzing to The Blue Danube, holding her within the hollow of his arm, blushed to the sweaty band on his big gray hat.

SHE flushed a little, too, and half smiled at him, but Handsome did not see that. He was noticing how little her hand was, holding back her blue ruffled skirt.

"That there," said the garrulous storekeeper, "is Mis' Florence Gray. Widow woman that's opened up a Home Rest'rant over acrost the street. Looks like you made a mash a'ready, Handsome."

This, like his nickname, was another Flatwillow joke. Men loved to pretend that all the pretty women in the country were in love with Handsome. The idea was very comical. The storekeeper laughed now for about ten seconds.

"Can that," Handsome advised then in a tone neither amused nor shy. "Dig up the HP mail."

"No, but on the square, she was askin' me all about yuh. Who yuh was and where yuh worked—said yuh rode like a center. I d'no what she meant by that. She——"

"Did yuh know what I meant when I said I wanted the mail?" Handsome inquired levelly. "Some day, Pete, someone's goin' to get curious and take yuh apart——"

Pete got the mail forthwith and without further comment, and young McGraw put it into an empty floursack kept for that purpose and tied it firmly behind his saddle. From under his wide hatbrim he eyed the white curtained windows of the new Home Restaurant across the street. A widow, hunh? She sure looked awful little and young to be running a restaurant.

He untied the sorrel bronc, did a profane and embarrassed toe dance, one foot in the stirrup and the sorrel backing in a circle away from his attempts to mount. Then he was up like a flash and galloping off in a whirl of dust, wondering what riding like a center meant, anyway. Nothing complimentary, he gloomily surmised.

THAT night dreams came and held him fast. Beautiful, vivid dreams that made his waking a nostalgic pain. He dreamed that he was not so big and homely, and that the little blue lady loved him and was going to marry him just as soon as he was able to fix up a home for her. He dreamed that he called her Flo, and took her to the dance, and all the boys tried to cut in on him and couldn't.

Waking, he looked at himself in the glass and saw his high thin nose and his big ears. He quite overlooked the clear steadfast eyes and the fine mouth and strong chin. That beak of his was a standing joke among the HP cowboys. It was a nose very much like George Washington's, but no one had ever thought to tell him that. He wished to hell he knew what riding like a center meant.

Two days of fruitless cogitation, and he screwed up his courage and asked the boss's wife, who used to teach school.

"Center? Some kind of riding? Do you mean centaur, Handsome? A centaur is a mythological creature, half man and half horse."

Handsome's ears burned for hours after that, and it wasn't the wind whistling past, though the bronc he was riding that day was a mean devil that wanted to run all the time. Handsome was trying to give him a bellyfull of running that day. So she called him half horse, did she? Well, he didn't know as he blamed her much—gentling broncs was about all he was good for—still, he went right on dreaming.

It was nearly two weeks before he ventured into Flatwillow again. In his dreams and on his long lonely rides he had built and was furnishing a little three-room house over on his homestead; the slickest little house any bronc-rider who earned fifty dollars a month breaking horses for the HP could build and pay for.

He even purloined a last year's mail-order catalogue from the place where it was slowly disintegrating leaf by leaf (luckily from the front cover and only as far back as women's corsets, which he modestly tore off at once), and hid it in the haystack where he could snatch a few minutes now and then picking out furniture for his unbuilt house and making lists which he conned over and over, worried over the mounting cost.

These things bred self-consciousness. In town he half expected the first man he met to bone him about setting up housekeeping with the little widow. He was afraid the blacksmith would laugh knowingly when he showed the broken bridle-bit he wanted mended.

"You can leave that till after dinner if you want to," he said gruffly. "Guess I'll go punish some of Dutch John's grub——"

"Say, you oughta wrap yourself around a meal at the Home Restaurant once!" the blacksmith suggested, just as Handsome hoped he would. "Boy, that there's real cookin'!"

"We-el-l," drawled Handsome with his back turned, "maybe I will. I'm game to try anything once." Which was pretty fair dissembling, when one takes into account the bald fact that he had carried the broken bridle with him for two weeks, and had this particular bronc not been so hard-mouthed he had carried Handsome into the very edge of town before his rider could pull him down, he would no doubt have carried it longer.

DINNER was about over. Scared yet secretly exultant, Handsome found himself alone in the neat little dining room with the white Swiss curtains and potted geraniums in the windows. It looked a good deal like the little home of his dreams. With keen observing glances he tucked the dotted Swiss away in his memory. He'd seen that stuff in the catalogue, but had been afraid it wasn't fancy enough.

The little blue lady herself came to wait on him. With a disturbing friendliness she nodded and smiled, and said she noticed he was riding a different horse today. (Handsome had not dreamed she remembered him at all.) While she was scattering thick little egg-shaped islands of stewed corn, canned string beans and tapioca pudding around his plate, she also remarked that she had hired two boys to gather up all the loose papers in town. "I can't have possible customers breaking their necks in front of my door just at mealtime," she smiled. And, "Do you always ride wild bronchos?"

Handsome nearly choked on the juiciest, tenderest bit of roast pork he had ever flopped a lip over.

"Yes, ma'am." He swallowed, stirred his coffee violently round and round, though he had completely forgotten the sugar. "That's my job," he added with a daring that chilled his spine. "I bust broncos for the HP." Now his ears felt like boiled beets hung hot against his head. The plate he glared at blurred unaccountably under his eyes.

The little blue lady tilted up a chair and leaned upon it, just across the table. (Handsome was going to add that graceful posture to his dreams that night.) They were alone, and she talked and asked questions about his work. She used to ride a little. She loved horses. She apologized

for getting in his road, that day—but she hadn't seen him coming until that paper blew. How had he ever thought to throw his horse—thought *in time?*

Handsome McGraw didn't know. He guessed he just did it without thinking.

He never tasted a thing after that first mouthful of pork roast. He talked, and never knew aferwards what he had said. He was like a man in a trance.

THE awakening came with a jolt that was almost a physical pain. Sanderson, the big sheepman, came in and drew out a chair with a proprietary smirk not lost upon Handsome McGraw. Sanderson was a bachelor of forty or more. He pushed a round paunch before him and his eyes were like blue china beads set above his huge pink jowls and long yellow mustaches. But he counted his annual wool-clip by carload lots and his lamb crop by thousands, and any marriageable woman in the country would think twice before she refused to marry him if he asked her.

Handsome finished his third cup of coffee at a gulp, laid down a dollar beside his plate and left without saying goodbye, go to hell or where's my change. He got his bridle bit and left in a high lope and a cloud of dust, and it was two full days before he had the heart to dig his mutilated catalogue out of the haystack and look up the price of dotted Swiss.

Even then he was in a morose temper and swore because he couldn't tell how much it would take for ruffles and didn't have the gall to ask the boss's wife, who would think he was crazy in the head. He was so out of sorts that evening that at the supper table when Curley asked him to come alive and pass the prunes up that way, he suddenly blurted, right out loud:

"I may be half horse, but by gawd I don't blat!"

Which caused the HP cowboys to suspend chewing while they looked inquiringly at one another, like cows pausing reflectively over their cuds.

Six days, and he was back in Flatwillow. But he sat humped over a Mulligan stew at Dutch John's and stared unhappily across the street at ruffled white curtains of dotted Swiss, a flowering geranium standing half-way between each looped-back pair. He knew where he could get geranium slips, all colors.

The pain of that meal was beyond endurance. Next day he rode straight to her door and tied his bronc to a porch post and didn't give a damn who saw him. John Sanderson could push his paunch up to

the table every day in the week, and Handsome McGraw only hardened his jaw and outstayed him. (She didn't cook special things for Sanderson—or if she did, Handsome never found it out.)

ONCE, she whispered to Handsome. He was to eat just a little and come back around to the side door after the dining room was closed. She had something new and special. Crab salad, that was, with mayonnaise and stuffed green olives. The gastronomic shock was terrific, but Handsome swallowed every bit on his plate and lied about how good it was.

After that he began to look seriously into the future, and made surreptitious inquiries about life insurance, and learned with dismay that horsebreaking was classed among the extra hazardous occupations of man. After that his dreams were troubled. It didn't seem like a square deal to let a woman tie herself up to a man who couldn't get insured because his work was extra hazardous.

All poppycock, that idea the insurance companies had about it. Handsome never had considered it dangerous to bust broncs.

Just mean sometimes, like when you get hold of a killer and he tries to paw you down; or bust your leg with a forward kick when you're in the saddle. No picnic, maybe, but hazardous—hell!

So he didn't propose to the little blue lady, except with his eyes that worshiped her. Since his work held him at the HP ranch during roundup time, breaking broncs for sale as well as for home use, his time was largely his own and he could ride into town whenever he pleased; or drive, which he sometimes did when he was gentling a team for harness work.

ONE day when he and John Sanderson were trying to outeat each other in the hope of being the last to leave, the Benton stage rolled in and left a passenger who asked a question or two and came straight across to the Home Restaurant. A fat, smug-faced young man whose clothes were too loud, whose toothpick shoes were too shiny and too pointed and whose mouth was too small and mean, matching his foxy yellow eyes.

At sight of him the little blue lady turned a ghastly gray-white, and dropped John Sanderson's second helping of pie on the floor. Handsome thought she was going to faint, and sprang up, his back hair rising in primitive rage at a man who brought that sick despair into her eyes that had been smiling.

But she wasn't the fainting kind. She squared her shoulders and said, "Ted Gray! Where in the world——"

"H'lo, maw. Here's your little prodigal come home to eat calf——"

What more was said Handsome never heard. In his head was a great buzzing. He could have killed John Sanderson for the knowing smirk he tried to hide, smoothing down his yellow mustaches with a hand where a new diamond flashed.

She took her son into the kitchen and closed the door, and John Sanderson pushed back his chair.

"You can take the pot, Handsome," he grinned. "I'm throwin' down my cards." His hand on the door knob, he tossed a dollar back on the table.

"Another month and I'd a married her," he sighed. "But she can't ring in no tin horn like that on me."

TOO sick at heart to do more than sit there staring dully at his plate, Handsome mechanically stirred his coffee round and round. He heard that young whelp in the kitchen asking for money. "Aw, come on, maw, loosen up. I borrowed a hundred dollars to get here, and I promised to send the money right back, next mail."

Handsome went out into the hot sunshine, but he was still cold inside.

Later he saw her son sitting in a poker game with four sheep-shearers. Gambling with her hundred dollars—yes, and losing it as fast as those tough birds could take it away from him. Glass of whisky at his elbow. A hell of a son he was.

Next day, Handsome did not appear in town at all. He was riding the big sorrel swiftly out across Lonesome Prairie Bench. He rode forty miles before he stopped, and then he only stayed an hour or so and rode back again, following his own tracks. His face was stern and he had no heart for dreaming.

On the day after that he drove into town with the lumber wagon he used for breaking broncs to harness. He had a team of them now—as salty a pair of broomtails as ever tried to outrun the bouncing vehicle behind them. But Handsome drove them straight to his purpose along the trail of his own choosing.

He collared Ted Gray in his mother's kitchen, and his manner was deceptively mild.

"Want to earn some money—without any hard work?" (He could not meet his little blue lady's eyes, they were so big and full of hurt.) "All right, I know of a good job and I'm going that way. I'll take yuh right out there. Get your grip and come on."

And he drove for forty miles across

Lonesome Prairie, following the hoofmarks of the big sorrel bronc. He drove fast. Too fast for Ted Gray to risk jumping out when he got anxious over the distance and worried over his destination, which proved to be a sheep camp set back in a deep coulee. A hard-eyed man met them at the odorous corral where the broncs, tired as they were, nearly upset the wagon to show their violent dislike of the smell.

"Here y'are," said Handsome, motioning to Ted Gray to climb down over the wheel. "Sheep herding's easy. It's a picnic alongside what'll happen to yuh if you ever show your pug nose in Flatwillow again. Oleson, here, has got orders to hold out the first hundred dollars of your wages and send 'em to your maw. And if you ever ask her for another two-bit piece and I find it out, I'll kill yuh."

He nodded to Oleson, caught an understanding grin and a tilt of the head, and drove back along the bumpy trail and camped at the nearest spring.

HE DID not follow his own tracks home on this occasion. He turned aside and drove to the Sanderson ranch where the owner was so fortunate as to be at home. Sanderson was sitting on his front porch, smoking and gazing off to the low ridge, blanketed with a band of shorn ewes and lambs. He greeted Handsome with a grunt of surprise.

"I drove over to tell yuh you can go ahead and marry the widow; you needn't worry about the boy. He's got a good job sheep herdin'. Permanent for the summer. By that time he'd oughta be quite a help to yuh." Handsome's voice was even and hard as his inscrutable eyes.

Sanderson turned a rich plum red. "Hell! She won't have me," he blurted. "I was just runnin' a whizzer on yuh, Handsome. Go ask her yourself, why don't yuh? You're the one she's stuck on. Everybody knows it but you—and you would too if you wasn't so damn dumb."

By larruping the bronc team with the rein ends for the last few miles, Handsome made it to Flatwillow in time for dinner. When he went in the dining room was empty and the little blue lady had lost the hurt look from her eyes and was smiling again.

Still, he did not say what he had been composing and rehearsing all the way in from Sanderson's. What he actually said was, "I got a homestead and I could throw up a set of corrals and make good money breakin' horses at so much a head—some on shares. I've got enough saved up to build a house, but I can't git no life insurance—account of them pin-heads thinkin' it's so dangerous. But——"

HE GOT no further than that, because one of his dreams miraculously came true at that moment.

When Handsome's head quit whirling and he could think straight, he made shamefaced confession, "I took Ted out forty miles and dropped him. At a sheep ranch. He'll pay back that money he bummed off'n you to gamble with or Oleson'll wring his neck. Maybe I'd no business to butt in——"

"It's what I should have done long ago," sighed the little blue lady. "He was just a spoiled hulk of a boy when I married his father, and I should have left him with his grandfather. I guess I'm too soft. But I did want to do my full duty by the young cub——"

"He—he ain't yours?" Handsome's eyes widened with bewilderment.

"Why, silly, how old do you think I am? Ted was twelve when I married Gray. A bad egg, and always was. If he comes here again——"

"He won't," Handsome McGraw said darkly, and once more found the little lady in his arms, just as his sweetest dreams had pictured her.

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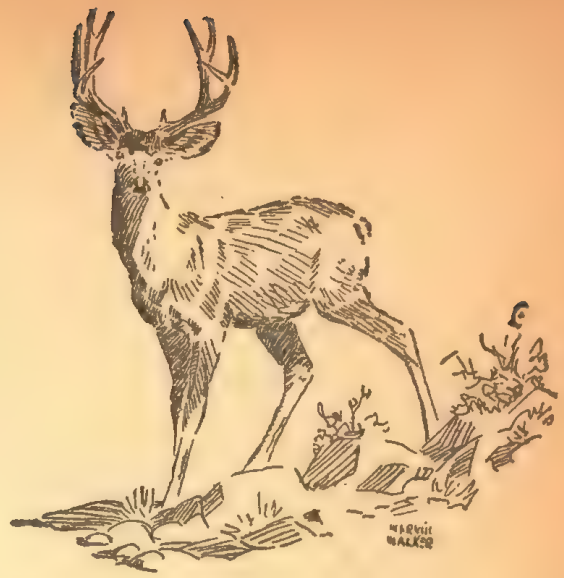
Panhandle Pete of Ranier National Forest Helps Produce the Evidence

CHISELER

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "The Last Pack," "Panhandle Pete," etc.



A BELATED Chinook—or warm wind—accompanied by a heavy rain had struck the Puget Sound country and the rivers were running bank full. The roar of the Nisqually River filled park ranger Buck Seaton's ears as he trudged down the trail to his cabin. He was wet to the skin and his sodden boots made a sucking sound with each step. He supposed Panhandle Pete, the park's pet deer, was probably contemplating the storm with complacent eyes, sheltered by the spreading branches of some convenient tree.

"That buck sure leads the life of Riley," he grumbled. "Lives on the fat of the land and doesn't have to turn a hand, or a hoof I suppose you'd say. Me now—it's just one thing after another."

Like a tired horse nearing the barn, Buck quickened his pace a quarter of a mile from the cabin. His wife, Mary, would have a hot mulligan on the stove. And there would be coffee, not to mention apple pie. But it was the mulligan that chiefly occupied his thoughts. It would be steaming hot and it would hit the spot. Mary Seaton didn't make mulligans, she *built* them.

He rounded a turn and looked down on the clearing. The cabin was dark. "Now what?" he grumbled. "I phoned her I'd be in tonight. She knows it's raining and ——" A trace of alarm swept through his rugged figure.

He struck a match, touched it to the nearest lamp wick and looked around. There was a note propped up against the nickel alarm clock. It read:

"Buck:

I'm running a race with the stork to McCoy's cabin. Will be back when you see me. Mulligan on the stove.

Mary."

So she was racing the stork? "And in weather like this," he muttered, lighting a fire.

Buck was familiar with the country surrounding the McCoy Cabin. A hill billy had settled on a strip of fertile soil which began at the park boundary. The man had reasoned, logically enough, the park deer protected from hunters would wander into his pastures where he would have the legal right to shoot them during the open season. Thus he was insuring himself and family a meat supply with little effort.

Eventually the hill billy had fallen into the habit of slipping across the boundary for his meat. He had given the rangers no end of trouble. It was the hill billy code, handed down through many generations—a man had a right to kill what meat he needed. And there is nothing harder than going against an established code. On his death his family had left the country and the ranch had remained idle for

years. Then another hill billy, named McCoy, accompanied by a girl wife, bought the strip for its taxes and moved in.

Buck Seaton had met him once—half a mile inside the park area. He carried a well worn thirty-thirty rifle in his hands and he had insisted his trespass was unintentional. "O. K., McCoy," Buck had answered. "I'm taking you at your word. This is a warning. If I catch you inside the park boundary again with a rifle you'll be arrested. And if you kill deer *outside* the boundary during the closed season, I'll run you in—I hold a state game warden's commission. No hard feelings, McCoy, just want to make myself clear." And Buck Seaton had smiled.

"A man should have the right to get his meat when he needs it. Us mountain folks don't kill fer fun like them gun club dudes —jest fer meat," McCoy had retorted.

AS THE mulligan began to warm up, Mary came in. She was drenched, but radiant. "It's a boy," she breathlessly informed him. "The doctor finally got there. Everything is lovely. But they haven't hardly any grub in the cabin. And no money. I asked John McCoy why he didn't apply for relief."

"What did he say to that?" Buck inquired. "They're an independent breed, those hill folks."

"He said he had made application when it was time for the baby to arrive," Mary replied. "But Gerber, over there at the hunt club, protested. Gerber explained to the welfare people that the club had offered the McCoys a good price for their land; that it had been refused, and that as long as they had assets in the form of property for which a cash offer had been made, he didn't think the taxpayers should aid them."

"And Gerber has enough drag to block them," Buck observed. "What was McCoy's reaction to that?"

"He told the welfare folks, in Gerber's hearing, the McCoys had lived off the land hundreds of years wthout help, and he guessed he and Elsie—that's his wife—could manage," Mary concluded.

"I hope McCoy doesn't try to manage at the expense of Panhandle Pete," Buck observed as he hastily set the table. "He's been hanging around that country for several weeks. I got a hunch he's the proud father of a spotted fawn I saw up that way. Oh well, the tourist season is at hand and Pete will soon be hanging around Longmires, bumming tobacco from the men and posing for the ladies."

"This rain should drive the deer down," Mary suggested. "Some of those draws are flooded."

They fell asleep that night to the patter of rain on the roof and the deep song of the wind rushing through the tree tops. Once, when there was a lull, Mary Seaton rolled over and looked out the window.

She saw a shaft of silver moonlight, scudding clouds and the great white peak the Indians called God. She was dozing off when a different sound intruded. "Buck!" she called softly. "Was *that* a rifle shot?"

He did not answer and she listened a moment, then snuggled deeper into the blankets. "Probably not," she said sleepily. "And yet—the McCoys' code wills that they live off the country and take meat when they need it. I'll sure be glad to see Panhandle Pete again."

None better than Mary Seaton realized that the buck would supply the McCoys with meat for many weeks. And none better than she appreciated the desperation she had seen in John McCoy's eyes, now that the baby had come.

BRILLIANT sunshine flooded the cabin when the Seatons awakened. Only the roaring Nisqually hinted at the recent storm. Mount Rainier stood out, clean cut, sharp, against a deep blue sky. Here and there they caught a flash of rarest green as the sunlight touched the hanging glaciers.

Panhandle Pete tossed his superbly antlered head to the sky and stared at the cabin, but he made no effort to approach. While Mary prepared breakfast Buck smoked a cigarette. He opened the window and permitted the fragrant smoke to drift towards the deer. Once Pete sniffed and half started towards the cabin, then he lowered his head and began prodding something in the brush.

Becoming impatient the buck gave a vigorous shove and knocked a fawn into the clearing. It got on its uncertain legs and looked timidly about. "Hell's bells!" Buck exclaimed. "What's happened to the doe? She wouldn't quit her fawn.

Mary paused in her work and looked up, an odd expression on her face. "Buck. I thought I heard a shot last night, but you were sleeping so hard I didn't awaken you," Mary said. "You don't suppose John McCoy—got his meat?"

Buck did not answer as he hurried across the clearing and caught the fawn. Panhandle Pete had driven it, no one knew how far, through the storm. Possibly he realized it would receive help from the Seatons. Perhaps he was instinctively herding it beyond reach of flood water.

"The poor little thing!" Mary exclaimed. "It's sniffing around for its mother. Of course it's hungry."

Their own hunger was forgotten. Mary warmed tinned milk while Buck legged it to Longmires. "I want a bottle and rubber nipple," he announced. "Tourists leave everything, so someone, sometime, must have left baby's bottle."

The bottle was forthcoming after a brief search. He ran back with it and helped Mary give the fawn its first meal. "Of course," she said, "we have it on our hands from now on. The mother must be dead."

"Sure!" He laid a cigarette package down on a box and searched his clothing for a match. The fawn stretched out its sensitive nostrils and sniffed. "Look, the little cuss is beginning to chisel on Pete's tobacco already." He grinned. "With a cute little chiseler around, Pete won't find it so easy catching the feminine eye and the festive snipe this summer."

She looked up, smiling. "I guess you've named him, Buck. Chiseler!"

"Hadn't thought of that angle," the ranger admitted, "but he's got to have a name." He began filling his plate. "And that's as good as any." He sat down to the

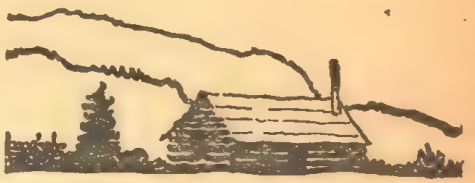


table. "Mind if I eat? I got a job ahead and a tough one; got to find out if that doe was killed. And—who did it."

"For once, Buck," his wife answered, "I hope you don't find out who killed the doe." She made a bed in the corner of the cabin for Chiseler. "A hill billy has his code of ethics. It conflicts with later, man-made laws, and I sympathize with their viewpoint. After all, they don't kill for sport. They kill for meat."

"Yes," Buck admitted, "the hill billy has his code. And I'm not forgetting it for a moment."

BUCK SEATON, with his knowledge of game trails and the habits of Panhandle Pete plunged into the dense forest with confidence. In time he found himself beyond the park boundary and skirting the rolling country which comprised the semi-estate of a group of wealthy men. Locally the place was known as the Hunting Club.

It contained several trout streams which emptied into a small lake. This lake, in turn, was drained by a large creek. It was said the club permitted trout to come up the creek to spawn in the upper streams, but was careful they did not go out. This insured good fishing. The lake served as a resting place for ducks on their Southern flight in the fall.

An area within nice shooting distance of well placed blinds was kept supplied with wheat. Thus hundreds of ducks decided to remain. Once a week the club members gathered, indulged in a brief session of shooting and returned to their several homes with limit bags.

The club did not own the mountain country back of their property. But it, too, served as private grounds. Hunters could not pass through the park, armed. They were blocked from crossing the club property and were thus turned away from some of the best deer country in the Northwest.

The McCoy ranch served as a sort of buffer state between the Hunting Club and the park, or its members would have enjoyed hunting deer that came from the protected area. The club had had several opportunities to buy the land for taxes, but believing no one would ever resume ranching there, had rejected all overtures to that end from the county. Quietly John McCoy had established himself. Offers to buy had been refused. Threats had not frightened him. This was the nearest thing he had found to his native Kentucky mountains and he determined to remain.

Buck Seaton reviewed the history as he swung along. A mile from the Hunting Club cabin, he was hailed. He responded and found himself facing Gerber, club president. He was a deep chested, broad shouldered individual with a cold blue eye and bulldog jaw. Golfing, hunting and fishing kept him fit. He was almost as bronzed as the ranger.

"Here's something you want to see, Seaton," he said. The man led the way to a hidden pool deep in the timber. It might have been passed unnoticed except that a faint game trail led to it. Its surface reflected the blue sky and the tree tops. It was edged with delicate ferns. Drops of water gleamed like diamonds on the fern leaves, and there was an atmosphere of complete peace about the place, except for one spot.

Here blood stained the ground, and there were bits of hair on the bark of a tree. Agonized hoofs had cut the sod and smashed down the ferns. Tiny hoofprints were visible in the soft mud, but were lost on the harder ground beyond.

"That damned hill billy shot a doe here last night, sure as hell," Gerber declared. "The boys are pretty well steamed up over it; ready to take the law in their own hands if something isn't done."

"Something's being done," Seaton replied. "I'm doing it in the absence of one of the regular state game wardens."

"There's a standing reward, paid by the club, for the arrest and conviction of anyone illegally killing a deer within five miles of club property," Gerber said. "A hundred dollars."

"A hundred dollars is important money these days," the ranger observed. "How many club members are up here today?"

"Ten or fifteen," Gerber answered. "I don't know who came in last night. We figured on some good fishing. The storm came up suddenly and the streams are too high, so——"

"So eating, drinking and poker at the clubhouse," the ranger suggested. "How'd you happen to learn a deer had been killed? Someone turn McCoy in?"

"One of the boys heard a shot. He looked out and is positive he saw a flashlight—shining deer, you know," Gerber said. "He reported it this morning, and I investigated. I know the trails pretty well and had an idea a game trail would lead to something. It led to the pool. The deer's gone——"

"It was a doe, Gerber," Seaton informed him. "A complete absence of antler marks on the mud and sod proves it. Besides, Panhandle Pete was at the cabin this morning and I know it wasn't him. He's chased all other bucks out of this part of the country."

"Here're tracks," Gerber said, pointing. "I didn't follow them, but I'm betting they belong to McCoy."

APPARENTLY the poacher had made an effort to throw possible followers off his trail. There were stretches where it disappeared into a nearby creek. Again it followed hard ground. But with the weight of the doe on his back, the man's boots had gone deeper than normal. "It shouldn't be hard," Gerber suggested. "They're visible at intervals and lead towards McCoy's place."

"The tracks lead to McCoy's sure enough," Buck admitted. "There's been trouble between you two, hasn't there?"

"Plenty! He won't sell. We offered him a good price. The hill billy is a stubborn breed to deal with. Yet he had the nerve to ask for relief. I couldn't see why it should be granted. The club lodged a protest. Every member is paying plenty of taxes to keep a lot of men who don't want to work in food, shelter and clothing. When there is an example, such as this, it should be brought to public attention. McCoy paid seven hundred and some odd dollars in back taxes for the place. We offered him three thousand, and then five."

"That's more than it's worth," the ranger admitted.

"Don't you see his game?" Gerber went on indignantly. "He'll help himself to park deer as well as the game that runs ou our property. And we're in a tough spot. Opposition to him puts us in the position of persecuting a poor devil trying to get along. It's the old story, the powerful man crushing the little fellow."

"That's the way the public will look at it," Buck admitted. "Well, go on back to the clubhouse. If I need help, I'll call."

"Be careful you don't get a slug of lead between the eyes," Gerber warned. "Goodby and—good luck."

They separated and the ranger headed directly for the McCoy cabin. He checked on the poacher's trail often enough to assure himself it continued in the direction he was taking. A quarter of a mile from the clearing he lost it in a stream that had risen during the night. Any tracks left along the bank had long since been wiped out. "Pretty clever," Buck mused. "I'm dealing with one smart lad."

THE McCoy clearing was typical of the mountain country. A fence of sorts, in need of repairs, ran about the clearing. A smaller area was enclosed. The black sod indicated that a vegetable garden had been planted. A belled cow browsed somewhere in the thicker timber. Her bell clanged frequently.

The roof was covered with moss, which was also visible in spots on the log walls. There was a barn made of split cedar shakes, but the wind had blown some off the roof and a few off the sides. Hunters, in the past, had doubtless borrowed some of them for fuel.

A horse, needing the clippers, regarded the ranger without interest. Smoke trailed from the stone chimney, but the silence within the cabin was significant. The very air had the tenseness of a finger crooked about a trigger.

With arms swinging at his side the ranger walked up the weedy path. Fifty yards from the cabin a rifle came through a crack in the door. "Stop right where you air, Ranger," John McCoy warned. "You're close enough fer palaver, and I ain't takin' no chances on tricks. We air glad fer what your wife done yestiday fer my woman, but——"

"I'm not even packing a gun, McCoy," Buck answered, "so keep your shirt on. Besides, how do you know I'm not paying a friendly visit. Aren't you admitting something?"

"I ain't admittin' nothin', Ranger," McCoy answered. "I'm just defendin' me an' mine, the best I know how. I'm denyin' everything you charge me with. And I'm defyin' you to prove nothin' on me. There's them that'll bear false witness, like it tells of in the Bible. And I know I ain't got a chancet again' 'em. So keep your distance, Ranger."

"I'm playing no favorites, McCoy," Buck retorted. "I'm coming into the cabin for a talk."

He advanced, his eyes on the rifle muzzle. The bore seemed to grow larger and larger. The muzzle trembled slightly then steadied. Buck did not falter, and he heard a girl's voice plead, "Don't do it, John. Remember there's the baby, now."

There was something both pathetic and tragic in the way McCoy lowered his rifle. He was not afraid of law officers and their weapons, but the new responsibility drained the steel from his arm. He opened the door and said, "Come in!"

Buck smiled at the girl in the bunk and looked briefly at the downy head visible against a light blue blanket. "I want to see your boots, McCoy," he said. "Not those you've got on now, but the ones you wore last night."

"He wasn't out last night, Mr. Seaton," the girl insisted. "I swear it! He wouldn't leave me and the baby. You must believe me."

"You slept soundly, didn't you?" Seaton asked gently.

"Yes—but—I'd have woke up," she argued.

"He wants the hundred dollars the Huntin' Club offers fer poachers," McCoy interrupted. "I weren't out."

"I'll have a look in this closet if you don't mind," Buck said. He opened a split cedar door and peered about. A small, open window, supplied ample light and he noticed several pairs of boots on the floor. One pair was wet. He examined the calk pattern on the soles. It was the same pattern the poacher had worn.

"I ain't had them boots on fer a week or two," McCoy snarled. There was in his eyes the desperate glitter of a trapped animal. "And what if I did have 'em on, that don't prove I killed a deer. And what if I did? A man's got a right to take meat when his family needs it. If my woman hadn't been bed-ridden you'd never even seen me."

"He never left the cabin, I tell you," the girl repeated. "I'd've knowed it!"

"How'd you know a deer was killed?" Buck asked.

"I heerd a shot las' night. This mornin' you come," McCoy answered.

Buck examined the boots inside and out, then he looked at McCoy's socks. "I'll be back later in the day," he said.

He made his way to the nearest telephone and called Mary. Receivers came down along the line. He could hear them, but he said, "Will you come up and look after Mrs. McCoy as soon as you can? I've got to take McCoy away."

"You found the doe?" she asked quickly.

"Not yet, but I expect to before midnight," he replied. "I can't make out a case until I find the doe and am able to prove who killed her."

BUCK returned to the McCoy cabin and waited until Mary appeared, then he had a few words with the two women and motioned McCoy to come along. He cut across country to his own cabin and arrived late in the afternoon. Panhandle Pete was sniffing about. At sight of the men he became stiff-legged and arrogant.

Buck tossed him several cigarettes. "Work on them, you conceited bum," he said. "Just because you've helped this case by driving in the fawn is no reason to get swell-headed."

Buck and McCoy ate a hurried meal, then the former picked up the fawn and plunged into the forest. McCoy followed and Panhandle Pete trailed him. "This is getting to be a regular parade," the ranger growled. After a while he gave the fawn to McCoy. The little creature was famished, but the ranger did nothing about it.

It was dusk when the Hunting Club barbed wire fence blocked their path. A sign warned against trespassing. They crawled through the fence and walked to within a hundred yards of the log clubhouse. "You stay here," Buck directed, "And whatever you do, don't go off half-cocked."

"Nothing would suit them dudes better'n to catch me on their ground. They'd blast me to hell," the hill billy replied. "I'll be here when you want me!"

Buck picked up the fawn and walked to the hewn steps. He knocked on the door and was admitted by a servant. Voices came from an adjoining room, and with them, the clink of glasses. "Tell Mr. Gerber, Buck Seaton is here," the ranger said.

The servant bowed and departed. There was an odd glitter in his eyes, but his face betrayed nothing. Buck found himself in a well furnished room, the chief feature of which was a huge fireplace. A man could walk into it and turn around with

a stick of cordwood in his hands. Hunting trophies covered the walls, and there was a glass case in which shotguns and rifles were neatly racked. Deep chairs were everywhere, and beside them, smoking materials.

Gerber came in briskly. "Hello, Seaton. What have we here?" he said breezily.

"The dead doe's fawn," Buck replied. "I thought I'd bring it here while I looked around for the doe. No trace of it around McCoy's cabin, so there's a chance it was cached in some tree."

"Where'd the trail lead to?" Gerber asked.

"Almost to McCoy's," Buck answered. "And it was his boots made the tracks from the spring. I proved that." He put the fawn down.

"Have you arrested him? He'll skip the country if he thinks you're on his trail," Gerber said.

"He's sort of tied down by a new baby," the ranger replied. "But just to play safe, I've picked him up."

THE fawn, bewildered by the light, moved awkwardly about the room. Men drifted in from other rooms, watched its antics and laughed. Somebody offered the ranger a drink; someone else a smoke. "Thanks, boys," Buck answered, "but I'll postpone celebrating until the case is finished."

The fawn sniffed at a closet, then went on to a rug in a smaller room. It dabbed daintily at the rug with a tiny hoof and sniffed. "It must have struck a scent that it likes," the ranger suggested. "What is it, Chiseler?"

"Something spilled on the rug, no doubt. Tobacco?" Gerber said. "Maybe he's Panhandle Pete's son." Laughter ran through the men.

The ranger lifted the rug with a quick gesture, revealing a trap door. He hooked his finger through a ring and lifted the door. "Wine cellar," Gerber said. His voice was flat. "We've got most anything you want!"

"I'll have a look if you don't mind." He stretched his arms above his head and yawned. "It's been a long, hard day, gentlemen." Then he descended the narrow stairs. Instantly the trap door fell on him.

"Yes," he drawled, "it's a wine cellar. Not much wine here, though. And what a place to conceal game killed out of season. A brace of mallards, and—a doe!"

IN THE room above Gerber and his associates were exchanging startled glances. "Now what?" one of them asked in a hoarse voice. "We've got him trapped, but what're we going to do with him?"

"If this gets out," Gerber said in a desperate voice, "the club's ruined. I stole that hill billy's boots, killed the doe and packed her almost to his cabin. I couldn't see a way to plant the deer without running the risk of getting caught. I crossed the clearing in my socks, and dropped the wet boots into the closet. The window was open. Then I followed the creek bank.

The rising water covered my tracks. So what the hell turned his suspicions this way?"

"And we thought we had McCoy framed and could force him to sell," another growled. "Simple enough, the fawn's hungry and scented its mother. But what're we going to do with Seaton?"

The answer came in the crash of glass. They saw the muzzle of a well-worn rifle, and behind the sights, John McCoy's narrowing eyes. "Y'all reach high," he said in a soft, satisfied voice, "and let Buck Seaton come out'n that cellar."

No one saw the grim-eyed servant slip softly through the back door, rifle in hand. McCoy's attention was centered on the group around the trap door. And their attention was centered on McCoy's tense trigger finger.

Gerber opened the door and Buck Seaton came slowly up, the doe on his shoulders. "Two of you men," he said, "sling this promising bit of evidence on a pole and pack it between you. The others line up behind them. We're starting for town tonight. The case is complete."

"But I cain't figger why you didn't run me in jest fer luck," John McCoy said, as the men lined up outside. "My code that a man should take meat when he needed it was again' me."

"Your code cleared you, McCoy," Buck Seaton replied. "No hill billy would kill a doe during the fawning season, because that'd mean the fawn's death, too. And the fawn—is future meat. So it looked like a frame-up, all things considered. I worked on it from that angle, even to telling my wife over the telephone that I had arrested you. I knew the club lads were listening. Then, too, a hill billy, doesn't wear imported wool socks. And I found strands of such wool inside of your boots. And Gerber had been wearing similar socks——"

"All of which," a grim voice snarled, "won't do you any good. I'll take that evidence!"

BUCK SEATON raised a calm pair of eyes. He detected movement in the thicket and suspected the servant had slipped out and had the drop on them. But even as he lost hope of holding his evidence so necessary to prove the case, triumph rushed in. He repressed a grin. There was, also movement beyond the gentleman with the rifle. He saw the faint outlines of a familiar figure. "Get him, Pete!" he shouted.

The servant whirled, to resist attack from behind. He looked into the large, luminescent eyes of Panhandle Pete who had smelled tobacco on his clothing and had quietly approached to beg. When he turned back, it was to look into the hill billy's thirty-thirty. The weapon fell from his own hands and he joined his employers.

"Hold 'em here a minute," Buck Seaton ordered. Then he returned to the clubhouse. He gathered up a dozen packs of cigarettes and tossed them to the buck. "I'm giving 'em to you now," he said, "because you earned 'em. Besides, with Chiseler on the job this summer, you won't have things all your own way with the tourists."

"If that's all," Gerber complained, "let's get going."

"That isn't quite all," Buck answered softly, "the club has a standing reward of a hundred dollars for the arrest and conviction of anyone killing deer illegally near the club grounds. Make the check out to John McCoy. His meat's getting low—and a hundred dollars will buy a lot even in these times."

The Desert Towns of Buzzard and Cowtrack Meet at the Deadly Game of Cavalry Football

Baldy Sours and the Polo Game

By CHARLES W. TYLER

Author of "Baldy Sours and the Tin Horse," etc.

THE town of Buzzard is in the Mohave Desert. It has got a general store, a push-an'-pull gas pump, a saloon, a eatin' place an' a popperlation of a hundred an' ten—26 livin', an' the rest in Boot Hill. Oh, yes—an' old lady Bibb.

They is a sign on the edge of Buzzard. It says:

4 MILES TO WATER.
10 MILES TO WOOD.
7 MILES TO HELL.
TOURISTS STOP AND FILL UP.

"Titterin'" Tight is the mayor an' city council, an' owns the gas pump. He has got one of them mammoth brains which you got to poultice to make a idea come to a head. Just like "Baldy" Sours, me an' Texas Joe's feeble pardner.

Us cowboys pull up in front of the hitch rail one day last summer, an' enter the late lamented "Casket Charley's" drink parlor.

"How is the depression in Buzzard?" I asts Titterin' Tight.

"Forty y'ars," he state, "an' Buzzard ain't licked yit."

"Podner," says Baldy, "jist what depression, fer cripe sake, are you talkin' about?"

"The only one," bites back Titterin'. "Ninety-three, ye durn fool!"

Gentlemen, that was Buzzard.

Whereat Baldy an' Texas Joe sob on each other's bosom.

"Why don't yuh make a bid for some tourist business?" I says. "Tourists has got money," I tells 'em. "There is four thousand gold minds drivin' from Los Angulus to Las Vegas every day—just to see that Hoover don't get his name on that Republican tombstone in the river."

"Tourists?" says Jake Blouse, scratchin' his head an' spittin' in the dirt. "What the hell is them?"

"They is nuts," I says, "that drive ninety miles an hour through the greatest scenery in the world, so's they can play the nickel machines, an' say they been there."

Old Zabriskie Sack's Adam's apple commence beatin' like a pulse, which is a sign that some language is elbowin' of itself around in his gullet. "Damn smart idee," he finally blurt, wipin' a drizzle of Five Brothers off his whiskers. "But tourists is genteel as hell. They want more refindments an' not so much hoss play."

"Hoss play," I says. "Hoss play. Lissen!" I says. "I got a swell ijee."

"Gawdfrey!" croak Texas Joe, clutchin' his head. "Ag'in!"

"It's a blood clot," state Baldy, lookin' for a club. "Wait a minute, an' I'll knock it loose."

"If we was in Nevady now," ruminate "Twitter" Burke, "an' we had a eight-hour divorce co'rt an' a list of newly mar'ed couples——"

"Whut was ye sayin' about hoss play?" inquire the old lady Bibb, beetlin' her brows an' twirkin' her lip magnevolent. "Who pays fer them drinks?"

WE had drifted into Casket Charley's place an' throwed a round down the rat-hole without no generous soul volunteerin' to lay some dinero on the line. Missus Bibb is Casket Charley's survivor, an' she has of got all the pleasin' aspects you would get from lookin' at the muzzle of a shotgun.

"Hoss play," I repeats, goin' through the motions of searchin' my pants for money. "Poley!"

"Poley?" inquire "Gummy" McCarty, cockin' an eyebrow an' tryin' to look bright. "Whut in hell is poley?"

"Ye damn iggerunt ole coot!" says Jake Blouse. "Don't ye know nothin' scurcely a-tall. It's feet-ball played with calvary."

"Shorely," murmur "Greasy" Mundy. "Pool on hoss-back."

"Naw," says Morman McClanahan superior. "Crowkee with mauls. Hoss hockey."

"They is eleven to a side," I says, "beside the judge an' jury. Maybe more."

"Does toorusts go fer this yere poley?" inquire Two-peak Johnson.

"They eat it alive," I says. "They come for miles around."

"Whar do ye play poley?" ast Chuckwalla Ike.

"On a flat place," I explain, "like Hell's Dance Hall, the dry lake out here. They is goal posts on each end."

"What fer?" says Twitter Burke.

"He means giblets," explain Titterin' Tight, "where ye hang hombres."

"Who hang who?" ast Gummy McCarty, lickin' his chops.

"Buzzard could get up a team," I says, "an' challenge Cowtrack to meet 'em."

"Challenge, hell!" snort "Borax Bill." "We jist declare open season on them

hoss's-necks to Cowtrack, an' slay 'em."

"See!" yap Texas Joe. "The Apaches had a name for it. Minders an' cow-pokes is pizen, an' you give 'em a mallet an' they numb each other galore. I'm gone yander right now."

"The likker is good," Baldy state, eyein' the bottle fond, "an' this fair damzell"—rollin' his eye at the old lady Bibb the same as you pour molasses to catch flies "remind me of them pooty critters in the Harvey Houses. Le's dwell here until spring round-up."

Missus Bibb smirk at our simple pardner—an' we've made our bed.

TITTERIN' TIGHT was appointed Chamber of Commerce, on account of he talks more an' knows less than any jasper in the Mohave. He had of got to get pieces in the papers to Los Angulus an' Needles an' Barstow an' all them places, tellin' about the lovely climate to Buzzard an' the rooks an' rills, an' as how it was a pitcheresque town that had been a famous minin' camp.

A couple jaspers come out from Los an' wrote up a motor log for the automobile section of a paper, an' we was off. We dug the road in from the highway, an' put up a big sign that says:

4 MILES TO BUZZARD. FAMOUS GHOST TOWN. SEE THE OLD BUCKET OF BLOOD SALOON AND THE BULLET HOLES MADE BY DIAMOND DICK. WATCH OUR CAVALRY PLAY SOCKET. SUNDAY APRIL 14.
ADMISSION FREE.

"How we goin' to make any money if admission is free?" complain Jake Blouse.

But that was simple. The road between Buzzard and the dry lake is drifted over with sand two foot deep. So we put up a board that says:

THIS WAY TO THE GAME

An' down beyond the drifts we had another one that says.

CARS DRUG OUT OF SAND
$2.

Two-peak Johnson was goin' to Los Angeles, an' he says he would try an' pick up some implements cheap. Cowtrack informs Buzzard they will be tickled to death to come over an' play poley with Buzzard, or shot craps, or mop 'em up in any form s'gested.

A low-browed gent by the name of "Vinegar" Vine tame a flivver an' ride over one evenin' to palaver some for Cowtrack. We set forth the finer points in this here game of poley, an' he smirk delighted.

"Can any hombre pat how many gents with a mallet?" he want to know, eyein' Baldy in anticipation, I guess.

"Yuh taken one wipe at me," Baldy chirp, "an' yore mother's idjit is goin' to git abated."

"You an' who else?" inquire the peace envoy from Cowtrack, curlin' up his paw until it looked like a Janney coupler an' sidlin' around wary.

"A woolly sheep, hey?" says Baldy, startin' to swarm this Vinegar.

We unravel 'em, an' Vinegar Vine go his way rejoicin'.

THERE was a outfit south of Buzzard that had plenty hosses, which they says they'd loan us. The trouble was to convert some of these here jackass men in Buzzard to fork 'em. "Hungry Bill" an' "Ibex" Issac an' Borax, they allow they ride boo-raws.

"Who ever heerd of jackasses in poley?" yapped Twitter Burke. "Them durned, long-yeared critters couldn't git out of their own way. They wander out thar an' fall asleep, an' clog up the festivity."

"No boo-raw; no poley!" shrills Zabriskie Sack. "I got suthin' to say in this town, by thunder. Ole Kentunkey-Blossom may be a mite slow, but she's a gittin' fool fer arrivin'."

"Go on back to Death Valley an' stick yore snoot in a mind hole!" howl Twitter, all in a lather.

"Shet up!"

"Shet me up, yuh sheep-livered ole squirt!"

Man, but them old birds sure took this here thing serious.

Everybody wanted to play, on account of they figgered it would be the same as enlistin' in the marines, an' they'd be the first to fight. But we final get a team, an' she was a lulu. There was four desert rats, four punchers, includin' me an' Baldy an' Texas Joe, a mule skinner an' two Mex section hands. The rest of 'em was

substitoots. They figgered to enter the fray directly Cowtrack lay us first line hombres low.

Sampson Sebastian Sours, our bald-headed pardner, him an' the old lady Bibb was as thick as two swarms of bees in a hive.

She would say, "Sampsie, will yuh have a drink?" An' coil her eyes around him like he was hot cakes an' honey.

An' that simple gimmick would reply, "Yaas, Cootie." Which he beam on her until she like to melt an' run down in her brogans.

If yuh ever see a couple last winter's crows cooin' in a cornfield, that was them. It was abserloot sordid.

TWO-PEAK JOHNSON come back from Los Angulus, Pomona, Victorville an' way stations, an' his Ford was bog down like a sway-back cayuse from second-hand catcher's masks an' stummick perteckters, football head-bonnets an' crowkee balls. It seem he trade ore specimens, which he haul to town, to some of them learnin' factories for discarded athletic devises until you'd be alarmed.

April 14 dawn fair an' brite. Buzzard wake up to find she's got the biggest bed room in the world. Tourists has lay their soogans in the sagebrush in all directions. Titterin' Tight gets an attack of roomertizm in the skull tryin' to figger the best way to soak 'em. They don't none of 'em want no gas, but they all want water. As quick as Titterin' seen which way the wind blow, he put up a sign that says:

FREE GAS. WATER .50C A GALLON

Man, them hospitality.

Cowtrack come over an' bring a wad of dough that would choke a hoss. They offer to bet 2 to 1 that their team win the poley game, bury the dead an' are home ag'in by noon.

Buzzard copper the bet, an' lay 7 to 3 they never go home.

There was two judges. Gummy McCarty was for Buzzard. He says if he seen we was gettin' beat, he would disqualify Cowtrack complete an' we win on a foul. "Stinky" Flowers was the Cowtrack judge. Stinky was a good name for him.

He an' Gummy will arbitrate all disputes which arisen.

"Whut is them?" Gummy ast Stinky, eyein' some things Stinky has got suspicious.

"Boxin' gloves, ye ole fossil," simper Stinky. "One bleat out of yuh that ain't accordin' to the perscriptions an' I knock yore years down."

COWTRACK says the judges should ought to be afoot, an' Buzzard says they should ought to be hossback. But I says how could they decide things separate that-away. An' Stinky says the more separate he is from that damn Irisher the better.

"You birds is s'posed to occupy positions of dignify," I says. "Where you want to be is in a Ford so's you can powwow back an' forth about the britches of

ilket an' infringements of these yere perlite pastime," I says.

Gummy says he will not do no such thing unless he can have a pair of mittens like Stinky has got.

Well, we get a flivver without no top, an' the judges sit in back. Twitter Burke is elected to wrangle the Ford. The old lady Sack an' Baldy, they have got their heads together before the game start, the same as you put two cabbages in a pot.

"What the hell are you an' that ole catamount palaverin' about?" Texas Joe snarl at Baldy.

An' Baldy smirk, an' he says, "Me an' Pansy are got it all in the bag."

"You an' who have got what?" whinney Texas.

'Me an' Missus Bibb are betroughed," drool our simple idjit pardner. "As quick as I win the poley game, we gits knotted. She bet two hundred dollars on our side."

"Good grief!" gasp Texas.

How do you *know* we're goin' to win?" I asts that dim bulb we are teamed with.

"Lissen!" whisper Baldy, cute as kioty. "See them saddlebags on my hoss?"

I nods. "What's them lumps in 'em?" I says.

"Crowkee balls," Baldy says. "No matter how many touchdowns them Cowtrack jaspers git, we c'ral more. You two rannies jist see that the ball we're playin' with gits lost occasional. I ride toward their home plate an' drop one of these other poley balls onto the ground an' knock 'er through the posts."

Texas brighten. "Maybe you ain't so ga'nt between the horns as yuh look. I will lay a few iron plates ag'in them Cowtrack money myse'f."

Well, anyhow, the hour of execution arrive.

Twitter Burke blow the bugle on the Ford, an' the teams line up. Old Borax's boo-raw, Clementine, develop a stubborn spell, an' Twitter have to tow her.

Then Stinky Flowers raise his hand, Gummy shoot off a gun—an' war is declared. Holy cow!

A BIRD on the Cowtrack team holler "Yipee!" an' ride for the ball. He hit it a wallop, an' it fly up in the air an' clang ole Borax on the cupola. It make a ringin' sound an' jar Borax's eyeballs so hard they make two complete revolutions.

Borax collect his senses, which don't take long, on account of he ain't got many to collect, an' he bounch off Clementine madder than seven hundred hornets. He whirl around a couple times, lookin' to see which hombre he will kill.

"By the cheeperin' Judas Priest!" he bleat, "Who shot me with that gun?" Before he can clum' back on his jackass, some hombre run over him an' knock him flatter than a wet rug.

Vinegar Vine lope along beside Baldy, an' he holler, "Now who's a woolly sheep, yuh bal'-haided ferret?" An' he cock his mallet like he was goin' to drive a peg in the ground.

"I been waitin' years for this moment," Baldy holler, rammin' Vinegar in the ear with the handle of his maul.

Hungry Bill, a puncher on our side, is wearin' a baseball catcher's mask. I guess he feels protected the same as a monkey in the zoo, because he dash into the most sociable part of the function an' select him a pardner for the waltz, who is a waddie from Cowtrack wearin' the iron of "Whiskey Willie." What he call Willie would sprout strife in any man's language, Willie havin' previous spoke of Hungry's parents as havin' tails.

Whiskey sog Hungry across the mask, which push it practical permanent around Hungry's head. I hear they have to take him out of it with wire-cutters an' a blowtorch.

Jake Blouse circulate some, an' he implore Buzzard to, "Git skelps!" Jake has got on two baseball chest perteckters—front an' back—an' one of them leather skull cases footballs players wear.

Old man Blouse ain't got no mallet, but has shook out a lass-rope an' is buildin' him a loop. He pursue Whiffletree Wunce, when he get 'im out in the open,

an' spread a hole an' throw a dally. An' Whiffletree jerk out of the saddle an' open his wings.

As quick as he get done bouncin', this man Wunce unhook the latchstring on a half-breed holster an' drug forth some artillery, an' what he aim to do is shuck tail feathers out of some Buzzard citizens.

Titterin' Tight is hooked up in shin guards an' a tin helmet, an' he is pushin' around reckless on a jackass until a .45 hunk of lead out of the cannon of Whiffletree Wunce clang off his iron bonnet.

Immediate Titterin' is bayin' "Foul!" the same as a Union Pacific bulgine whistle for Las Vegas.

Twitter Burke rage up in the flivver, an' ole man Tight point at the dish in his lid an' demand that the judges call a penalty.

"Penalty, me eye!" snarl Stinky Flowers. "I dab a penalty on Whiffletree for high shootin'."

"I pertest!" screech Gummy. An' he push Sister Flowers down in the seat. "Foul fer our side!"

"Don't push me, ye ole batch of whiskers!" chirrup Stinky, an' he haul off to remonstrate some.

"I been hopin' fer the pleasure of punchin' you one!" yipper old man McCarty, windin' up like you would a clock at bed time.

Just then Twitter Burke seen a bigger an' better war out north a piece, an' he tromp on the gas an' kick 'er in low. The flivver take a bound, an' the two judges fall over the back of the seat all twined around each other like a couple Woodbines.

Texas Joe lope past, an' he says, "I been practisin' hoss-pasture billiards fer two weeks, when I oughta been l'arnin' to be a Cossack."

The cheerin' by the tourists around the edge of the dry lake is now unanimous. They been readin' about massacres sinst boyhood an' never dreamed, I guess, you could see one so cheap.

"Time out!" beller ole Borax. "I want to git my scatter gun at the store."

"Modoc" Mike Terwilliger run in to substitoot for Borax, an' he trot right across the path of a mallet, which tie around his neck like a scarf. Modoc pat the ground with his leather in a war dance that would make an Apache injun green with envy, while he swell up with sin like you fill a balloon.

"If I lay hands on ye, you spindle-shanked screw-worm!" he bray, "I'll sartin kick spokes out of ye like a busted wheel."

Zabriskie Sack is lookin' around innercent for the ball, which there ain't nobody seen sinst this here activity commence to

unfold, when one of the Cowtrack cavalry charge 'im. Zabriskie whack the boo-raw an' implore the critter to start the journey. "Gid-dap, yuh long-yeared, moth-eaten ha'f-an'-ha'f!" he caw. "D'ye want to stand hyar an' le'me git gored?"

The old lady Bibb is dashin' up an' down, an' that female act like she desire to put some horns on this dilema business. It appears that Pansy is wishful to communicate with our muley pardner, Baldy.

But Sampson Sours don't hear nothin' because at this juncture Vinegar Vine has now accumulated some more bib-overall sheepherders from Cowtrack, an' they surround this hoot-nanny the same as cow critters would a water hole. Me an' Texas come a-lopin', on account of we bet seven dollars on Buzzard, but if we let the wolves

devour him we would been just as good off, only we'd had to dig the bald-headed yahoo a home.

Texas grab his lariat an' shake 'er loose. Then he dab a noose on a Cowtrack rustler an' catch the slack before the feller can throw it off. The loop has got him around the middle an' over the horn, sort of tyin' 'im aboard. Texas let the dally go, an' the leather smokes. A couple foot from the end, Joe makes 'er fast, an' he's got fifty foot of singin' Manila yacht line between him an' this here bellerin' coot that's tryin' to back-track quick enough to duck out the noose.

It ain't no good. Tex is up on a ropin' hoss that don't allow slack to accumulate. Joe shoves in the steel an' swings wide. An' right now he reap some Cowtrack poley players. The lariat bulge, an' the riders that are caught sog together the same as a binder reap oats. What-all bloom now is sublime, no less.

THE hosses is a-squealin' an' a-pitchin', an' the Cowtrack punchers is a-hootin' an' a-hollerin', an' dust fog up the sun. Me, I cock an eye at them buzzards, circlin' overhead, like they sabe it's gettin' near mealtime. Directly I figger to start on a journey, because this here hoss hockey is out of bounds. Nobody had thought of the ball sinst the brawl commence.

Twitter Burke, he is ridin' out that Ford, tryin' to dodge broncs, jackasses, hombres afoot an' gunfire. "My Gawd!" he is beaglin'. "Whut a complicated pastime!"

"If this is a pastime," shrill ole man Sack, jumpin' off his boo-raw an' boundin' away afoot, "I'm a Piute squaw."

Ibex Issac dodge a mallet like jumpin' off a cliff an' whack up with Modoc Terwilliger.

"Look whar yo're goin', ye ole fool!" pant Ibex.

"Why don't ye turn yore neck around?" wheeze Modoc. "Yore haid is on backwards."

The two judges, Gummy McCarty an' Stinky Flowers, is pattin' one another with them club-foot mittens, when all of a sudden Clementine wet a wipe with a maul. This jackass lay away twenty years dignity an' decorum an' revert to jackrabbit. She bray once an' bound up in the air, an' part Gummy an' Stinky in the middle the same as you throw two halfs of cantaloupe into Yosemite Falls.

Missus Bibb is a-rootin' an' a-tootin' up an' down the shore line like you shoved a steam caleyhope off the Funeral Mountains.

"Git the ball through the gate!" she siren. "Git the ball through the gate, yuh nameless, bal'-haided, missin'-link! I got money bet on the damn cockeyed game!"

Baldy must of heerd Pansy twitterin', because they is a rift, so to speak, in the clouds an' he come caperin' through the same as them pitchers where the villin still pursued 'er. He is got four Cowtrack injuns right behind, lookin' for to see that Sampson Sours get his just desert, if any.

BALDY take out a couple winks from lookin' ahead to see where he is goin' an' behint to see what's comin', an' he flip his bread fork at the ole lady Bibb, an' chirrup:

"Yoo-hoo—cootie! I'll be seein' yuh!"

Do I mention that our simple pardner, Baldy, is a-wearin' a baseball catcher's mask onto the top of his head the same as a Easter bonnet? He done that because no matter what happens to his face it couldn't be worse than it is, an' the top of his skull has got a soft spot that runs clear through to his back teeth.

Well, you might of hearn tell of them Hungry Hussars that was in the cavalry. This was like that. Everybody was hungry—hungry for blood. Baldy look regal as hell, with that crate on his head. All it need was a sparrer in it.

Gentlemen, hark! If it was bats a gent would want, that danged cage was full of 'em—in this man Sours' belfry. Holy cow!

Baldy swing a circle, an' I seen him fumblin' at the saddle bag. Me an' Joe form interference, which is accomplished by pattin' the more obnoxious Cowtrack hoss-thiefs with a mallet. Vinegar Vine get suspicious all of a sudden, an' he yowl, "Where's the ball?"

"Whut ball?" yap some bird. "I didn't knowed they was a ball in this yere amoosement."

Baldy kick in the steel an' start off, yippin' to beat the band. I get a glimpse of him nursin' somethin' in his hand the same as a settin' hen with a crockery egg.

A Cowtrack hoss-thief bust me on the knoll, an' when I get done lookin' at washers around the moon, I can't see nothin' of Baldy. But Texas Joe taken one look some place an' clutch his head; then start for St. George. Whilst I'm wonderin' what has bit him, I hear the old lady Bibb chantin' war songs, an' I begin to suspect that the Potomac has bust its bounds.

Still, I thunk, maybe it is just her way of bein' kittenish. For I figger Baldy has knock the ball between the goal posts, an' the goose will hang high.

Gentleman, halk!

It wa'n't no goose that hung high. Not none. It was prob'ly goin' to be me an' Baldy an' Texas Joe.

This simple pardner of ourn, Sampson Sours, is as dizzy as fourteen hundred revolutions a minute. He dash round an' round until he fair create a blur. Just then Hungry Bill get underfoot, an' before we declutch, Baldy has throw down this here hockey ball an' slap 'er between the gate posts.

Immediate pendalum bust loose.

"Hooraw!" bawl Titterin' Tight. "We win the hockey game."

Baldy right shoulder his maul an' ride over where the old lady Bibb is boundin' up an' down an' pullin' out fur. The Cowtrackers has went complete loco, an' Stinky Flowers is throwin' up his hands yellin', "Gole! Gole!"

Me, I am complete edified. Buzzard will fitten reward us three cow pokes, an' all we got to do is collect the dinero we bet an' get pie-eyed.

Baldy lope up to where Missus Bibb is, an' he's smirkin' like four dollars' worth of weasels.

"Wall, cootie," he chirk, "crown me queen of the May——"

"I will crown yuh!" she chipped. An' grab a mallet out of Titterin' Tight's hands. "I will crown yuh, you ossified, gimlet-neck, scratch-me-eye!"

An' she wind up a couple of times an' let loose. Baldy hear the skull-cracker whistlin', an' he duck. His eyes is stickin' out like two knobs on a bureau drawer. He suck wind an' whisper, "Whut in hell bite that ole crow-bait?"

Baldy's cayuse crow-hop an' catch our simple pardner off balance. He hit an' bounce, just as the old lady Bibb swing ag'in. "Whut make the handle of this pimply damn hockey hammer so limp?" she sing. An' haul off ag'in.

Baldy coil his two legs under his dingbat an' start high-tailin', the same which he learn from a cattle stampede. It look like he was headin' for that there last round-up.

This Bibb female is just one jump behind the last time I seen 'em. Every hop, she try to rope Sampsie around the neck with that long-handled poley bat.

"Yuh long-yeared cattle louse!" she whoop. "If I git a holt of ye, I'll teach yuh better than to sock the dod-ram ball through yore own goal posts an' score tally fer Cowtrack!"

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